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EXTON MANOR

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE HOUSE OF MERRILEES
EXTON MANOR
THE ELDEST SON
THE SQUIRE'S DAUGHTER
THE HONOUR OF THE CLINTONS
THE GREATEST OF THESE
THE OLD ORDER CHANGETH
WATERMEADS
UPSIDONIA
ABINGTON ABBEY
THE GRAFTONS
RICHARD BALDOCK
THE CLINTONS AND OTHERS

EXTON MANOR

BY

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

Author of "Richard Baldock," "The House of Merrilees," etc.

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1919

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TO THE

LORD MONTAGU OF BEAULIEU

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Preface to the American Edition

EVERY other English reviewer who has written about "Exton Manor" has mentioned the name of Anthony Trollope, and, while I have no wish to come before American readers hanging on to the coat tails of a great man, and so gain a notice to which my own performance does not entitle me, I may yet gratefully admit my indebtedness to Trollope, and acknowledge myself a follower of his method, at least in "Exton Manor."

In one respect it is not only Trollope whom I have tried to follow, but the whole body of English novelists of his date, who introduced you to a large number of people, and left you with the feeling that you knew them all intimately, and would have found yourself welcome in their society. That particular note of intimacy seems to be lacking in the fiction of the present day, and I should like to have it back.

What Trollope did, and he was neither the first nor the greatest to do it, was to make up his groups from the people whose lives are lived chiefly in the English country, in the Cathedral or country town, in the Hall, the parsonage, and the "small house," which is perhaps more representative of English tastes and habits than any other.

Life in such a community as is depicted in "Exton Manor" is just as typical of English social habits as it was in Trollope's day. The tendency of those who have hitherto worked on the land to drift into the towns is not shared by the more leisured classes. Their tendency is all the other way—to forsake the towns for the country,—and improved methods of communication keep them more in touch with the world than they would have been fifty years ago But in spite of this

increased dependency upon the outside world, English country life is still intensely local in its personal interests, and quite legitimately so, for it must be remembered that, if the man who lives in a fairly populous country village comes across fewer people than the man who lives in a town, he knows all about those whom he does come across, and his acquaintances represent a far greater variety of type and class than is met with where types and classes tend to stratify. You have, in fact, in a typical country parish, a microcosm of English social life, and there is, ready to the hand of the realistic novelist, material from which he can draw as much interest and variety as he is able to make use of. Whether I have succeeded in the following pages in creating that interest and variety, while confining my scenes to the ground covered by a small country village, is for the reader to judge. Trollope could certainly have done so.

I should like to take this opportunity of touching on a few points of detail. I used the episode of marriage with a deceased wife's sister with no polemical intention, and it was by accident that the publication of "Exton Manor" coincided with the legalization of such marriages in England. It was the best example that I could think of to test the Christianity, as apart from the Churchmanship, of those concerned.

In Mrs. Prentice, who failed to pass the test, I have been accused of an overdrawn character. She may be overdrawn; but she drew herself, and I have never met her. I certainly repudiate her as my conception of the typical country clergyman's wife, who has a difficult part to play in life, and generally plays it remarkably well. At the same time I do not see why a woman of Mrs. Prentice's natural disposition, whose life is so much concerned with the externals of religion, while she has little or no grasp of its essence, should not develop in the way I have indicated, under the given circumstances.

Of the other characters in the story none is an actual

portrait. It is not a novelist's business to draw portraits, but to create living figures, and the nearer he gets to the first the farther off will he be from the second. "Exton" itself is a picture as close as I could make it of an actual place. I lived there for three years—at the White House—and I have re-let the houses of my friends, so to speak, to the people of my story. If that is a liberty it is the only one I have taken. Exton, or—to throw off the very slight disguise—Beaulieu, in the New Forest, is much visited, and though you may be able to recognize the Abbey and the Lodge and the Street House, if you go there in the summer, you will not come across Lady Wrotham, or the Dales, or Mrs. O'Keefe, or anybody like them.

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL.

The Watch House,
Winchelsea,
Sussex.

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EXTON MANOR

CHAPTER I

TWO BACHELORS AND SOME LADIES

THE lights of Captain Thomas Turner's dog-cart shone between the trees of the woodland ride, stood still for a moment at the gate, advanced a pace or two, stood still again as the gate banged to, and then came slowly bumping across the rutty grass track between the gorse bushes until they reached the high road. Here they faced to the right, and were borne evenly along the straight quarter mile which lay between the point at which they had emerged from the wood and the Upper Heath gate.

Captain Turner, owing to the number of years he had lived alone and busied himself with the absorbing, but hardly sociable, occupation of breeding trout, had contracted the habit of thinking aloud, and was so far aware of his infirmity that he had permanently relegated his groom to the back seat of his cart, when it would often have been more convenient to have him seated by his side. This precaution did not completely fulfill its object, and Robert Kitcher, the groom, was well posted up in the various currents of thought that, from time to time, passed through his master's mind. But he was a middle-aged bachelor himself, and, while turning over with interest the information he acquired as to his master's ideas and intentions, he imparted it to no one, and would, indeed, have considered it a breach of confidence to do so.

The detached sentences that came to his ears during this

half-mile drive, cut short occasionally by cautious mutterings, lost, too, sometimes in the gusts of March wind that blew across the open heath to their left, were somewhat as follows:

"Now, Thomas Turner, be careful to-night. Don't make a fool of yourself. You don't want her. You're very well as you are. Let Browne . . . if he's fool enough to want it . . . don't know when he's well off. You're forty-one, Tom Turner. . . ." Here followed a subdued mutter, and after that a sweep of wind, which lasted for some time. When it had died down again the current of thought seemed to have set in another direction, for the next sentence that came to the groom's ears was, "Funny thing, the two old men dying together. There'll be. . . . Hate changes. Wonder what Browne has heard from the old lady."

They arrived at the Upper Heath gate, which Kitcher got down to open, and drove a little way along the road to the right, and again to the right into the drive which led to the house of Turner's friend, Maximilian Browne, agent to the ten thousand acres or so of farm and forest land which made up the estate of Exton Manor.

That this house was not his ultimate objective became apparent from the fact that, when he drew up at the front door, Kitcher got down from behind and rang the bell, while Turner sat still with the reins in his hand, and addressed to his horse's ears the remark, "Bound to keep me waiting. Confound the fellow!"

The door was opened almost immediately by an elderly manservant, who said, "Mr. Browne has only just got back, sir. He told me to ask you if you would go up to him."

Turner alighted, and went into the house, and up-stairs to his friend's bedroom, where he found that gentleman in the very early stages of dressing for dinner.

"Now, don't swear, old man," said Browne, the instant he appeared inside the door. "It's all right. I sent a wire to

Mrs. Redcliffe, asking her to make dinner a quarter past eight. We've got plenty of time."

Turner gave a grunt, and stationed himself in front of the fire. He was a tall, thin man, dark, with somewhat pronounced features, and an expression that bordered on melancholy. This first impression, caused perhaps by a droop of the eyes and of the corners of the mouth, was lessened by a closer inspection of the face, and disappeared when the mouth opened to emit a voice that was gruff, but crisp and decisive in speech, and anything but melancholy. The high shoulders were slightly bent, but the spare frame was active and well-knit. The hands were nervous, the fingers long and pointed. The forehead was high and narrow, the head, covered with straight, dark hair, long.

Maximilian Browne had also reached the age of forty; that age at which life ceases to be lived in the future, and, if less ambitious than before, becomes a quite tolerable affair of the present. He was in appearance almost the complete opposite of his friend. He was of about the middle height, and inclined to corpulency; would, indeed, have been stout, had not a life of incessant open-air activity exercised a restraining influence on the natural tendency of his body. His face was large, and round and red, and his thick neck, now exposed to the gaze of the beholder, was weathered to the colour of brick-dust by sun and wind, and displayed an astonishing contrast of colour to the white skin below it. His straw-coloured hair was beginning to ebb away from his brow and the top of his head. His moustache was red, his eyes blue and mild.

Turner, from his vantage ground on the hearthrug, bent a searching gaze on him as he struggled into a white, starched shirt. "Any news?" he asked curtly.

"News? Yes," replied the other. "Plenty of news. I've had the deuce of a time with her ladyship. She's been hauling me over the coals most confoundedly. She's—well, I

don't know that I need keep it to myself; she didn't tell me to—she's coming to live here."

"Coming to live here? What, at the Abbey?"

"Yes. At the Abbey."

Turner gave vent to a long whistle of surprise. "Who would have thought of that?" he said.

"I'm bound to say I never did. In one way it's a relief. Ever since old Sir Joseph died I've been worrying over a tenant for the place, wondering whether I should get anybody to take it without the shooting. It's deuced hard to let a house of that size without the shooting, and Sir Joseph Chapmans don't grow on every tree. That difficulty's over. She's quite content to let the Ferrabys go on as they are at present. But—well, Turner, it's no use disguising the fact that her ladyship's going to upset us. Oh, good Lord! why can't I be allowed to live a quiet life?"

He threw up his hands in a comic gesture of despair, which seemed to relieve his overwrought feelings.

"What has she been hauling you over the coals for?" asked Turner.

"It isn't that so much. My position's all right. I never took a tenant without consulting the old lord, and, as far as I know, she never showed the slightest interest in anybody or anything to do with this place, as long as he was alive. But now she's got her nose into everything, and nothing and nobody's right. Mind, this don't go any further. I'm only telling you."

"Of course. It's the tenants who are wrong, is it? I don't think we're such a bad lot. What's the matter with this particular tenant?"

"We hardly mentioned you. Of course you're doing something on the place. In a way you go in with the farming tenants, and she don't complain of *them*. She knows nothing about them. It's the residents she's got her knife into."

"What's the matter with 'em? What's the matter with the Ferrabys?"

Browne paused in the act of fastening his braces on to an ample waistbelt, and composed his features to as near as possible an imitation of an elderly lady delivering a judgment. "Worldly people!" he said, with pursed-up lips. "Cannot possibly give a good tone to the place."

"They give jolly good dinners," commented Turner. "Does she want you to get rid of them?"

"No. I made her understand that they didn't give any tone to the place at all, either good or bad. They come down for a month in August, and off and on in the winter to shoot. They bring their own friends with them, they are two miles away from the village, and hardly anybody sees them here at all."

"You and I see a good deal of them when they're here."

"Yes. I didn't tell her that. Anyway, they don't spoil *our* tone much. So we left it at that. Then she began about Prentice. Was he high or low? I said he was high. I suppose he is, isn't he?"

"As high as he dares be."

"Yes; quite so. Well, I had an idea she was high herself, but it appears I was wrong. She's low. So that didn't suit her, and Master Prentice may look out for squalls."

"How about—about our friend?"

"Mrs. Redcliffe?"

"Well, Mrs. Redcliffe."

"She was rather odd about Mrs. Redcliffe. Shut her mouth up tight, and gave me to understand she knew all about Mrs. Redcliffe."

"She couldn't know anything about her that isn't all right."

"From her manner you would have said she did."

"Did you tell her she was an Australian? Some people object to Australians."

"She knew it. So I suppose she does know something about her. You know the old lord was governor of a colony out there years ago."

"Yes. Western Australia. But Mrs. Redcliffe comes from Queensland. It's as far as from here to Egypt. Still, people do know each other all over the continent out there if they are anybody, and Redcliffe had some sort of a government appointment. I dare say she would have heard of them. Still, I refuse to believe that she heard anything that wasn't all right."

"So do I. Still, it didn't look as if she was going to open her arms to her. Then there was Mrs. O'Keefe."

"Ah! Well, what about Mrs. O'Keefe?"

"I got really annoyed with her over that." Browne was now buttoning his waistcoat, and paused again to draw himself up into an attitude of inquiry, his large round head poised ludicrously aslant, and his red lips pursed. "'And who may Mrs. O'Keefe be?' I told her who she was. 'Her husband was a brother of Lord Ballyshannon,' I said. 'He died about a year ago, and she took Street House soon afterwards.' 'Lord Ballyshannon,' she said. 'Never heard of him.' I hadn't either, till Mrs. O'Keefe came here, so I didn't say anything. Then she snapped out, 'How old is she?' I said, 'I should think about twenty-five.'"

"She isn't," interpolated Turner, with a trace of indignation. "She's only just twenty-three."

"Well, I didn't want to give her away. Her ladyship looked at me with a sort of searching eye. 'A young widow,' she said. 'A beautiful young widow, I suppose, Mr. Browne.'"

"Got you there, Maximilian," chuckled Turner. "I suppose you blushed beetroot."

"I didn't do anything of the sort. I was very annoyed."

"Well, what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Then of course you blushed."

"I tell ou I didn't. Why should I? Then she had the cheek to say, 'I believe you let the Street House for ten pounds a year less than you got from the last tenant, Mr. Browne?' 'Yes, Lady Wrotham,' I said; 'I did. I exercised my discretion, and Lord Wrotham approved of what I'd done.'"

Turner chuckled again in acute enjoyment. "Virtuous indignation," he said. "The old lady's got sharp eyes. You'll have to go slow in your wooing, Maximilian, when she comes on the scene."

"My wooing! What nonsense are you up to? You know very well who's doing the wooing in that quarter. I should be ashamed of myself if I had any idea of a woman twenty years younger than myself. Not that I blame you for it. I was only saying to myself as I drove up, I hoped you'd fix it up pretty soon, as you seem bent on it. You needn't have any fear of my cutting in."

"Ah, it's all very well to talk like that. The old lady knew what she was about when she put that leading question. No, Maximilian; you don't work it off on me. I'm a great admirer of the lady. I don't deny it. But as for wanting to be anything closer, it has never so much as entered my mind. I'll be your best man if you'll have me, and give you a silver tea-service, the best that money can buy. Only have the wedding at some time when I'm not busy with the fish. That's all I ask."

"You're talking through your hat, Turner, and no one knows that better than you. It is my pocket the money will come out of for the silver tea-service, and you'll be welcome to it. I'm ready. Go on first, and I'll turn out the light."

The two friends, in the best of humours with one another in spite of their sparring, got into the cart and drove out

through the gate and down the hill between the leafless trees on either side of the road, whose branches were tossing in the March wind under the light of a struggling moon. At the bottom of the hill they came to another white gate, which opened into a short drive leading to the door of a low, white house, standing in a large garden, where they alighted, and were presently admitted into the warm interior.

The house was an enlarged cottage, delightfully transformed. They went from a red-tiled hall into a low oak-raftered sitting-room, full of unexpected corners, with a large bay window and half-glazed doors opening into the garden. The gay chintzes of the chairs and window curtains gave brightness to the room, and the many books interest. A deep sofa faced the fire burning in a grate of brick surmounted by oak panelling. The glow of the lamp and the many candles with which the room was lighted fell softly on china, silver, and old brass, and gave an air of warmth and comfort to a charming interior. It was a woman's room in which a man could feel at home, and Browne and Turner came into it, out of the cold March night, with a sense of gratification. They were alone for a minute or two, and then a door leading out of the room straight on to a little cottage staircase opened, and their hostess came in, followed by her daughter.

Mrs. Redcliffe was a woman of perhaps five and forty, of a square, middle-sized figure. Her hair was plentiful, but conspicuously grey, with white locks springing from her temples. Her face was pleasant and intelligent, quite free from care, and the grip of her plump, white hand gave an impression of firmness, and not a little warmth of character. The greeting between her and the two men was that of old friends, cordial, but without effusion.

It is not so easy to convey an impression of Hilda Redcliffe. She was at this time a few months short of twenty-one, and had all the grace and charm of fresh girlhood. But she had

something more. She had, if not actual beauty, for her features were perhaps too irregular for that, a face that would have attracted attention anywhere. If you looked first at the great masses of brown hair which shaded her brow, and then at her brown, honest eyes, fringed with long lashes, you said to yourself that she was certainly beautiful. Then when you took in the rest of the face, the short nose without special feature, the mouth too irregular for perfect symmetry, the decisively jutting chin, you were not quite so sure. But if she smiled, away flew your doubts again, for the two little rows of teeth were entrancing, and the smile revealed some of the charm of her frank and loyal nature. It was a face whose attractions would grow upon you, and, if you were of an age and condition to fall in love with its owner, might very well come to be considered beautiful, and something more. For the rest, she was half a head taller than her mother, and held herself straight, walking with the grace and ease of a young girl whose activities are concerned with the life of the open air, summer or winter, rain or shine. She also received the two men with an air of comradeship, and unconsciously emphasized the number of years that had passed over their bachelorhood by the freshness of her slim youth.

There was no time for more than a few words of greeting, for immediately after the entrance of mother and daughter the door by which the two men had entered the room opened, and Mrs. O'Keefe was announced.

Whatever doubt might have been felt at first sight as to the beauty of Hilda Redcliffe, there could be none about that of Norah O'Keefe. She stood for a moment in the white-panelled and balustraded recess which gave entrance to the room, and was raised a step above it, and the eyes of the four were drawn towards her in irresistible admiration. All the grace of early womanhood seemed to be gathered up in her tall, black-gowned form, to which the whiteness of her

throat and neck formed a contrast almost startling, unrelieved as her dress was by a touch of white. Her dark eyes were deep-set in a face of perfect oval, and her head, crowned with waving masses of dark hair, was poised lightly on the slender column of her neck. She wore a jewel in her hair, and a necklace of uncut emeralds. It is difficult to describe actual beauty. As compared with that of Hilda Redcliffe, although she was but little older, Norah O'Keefe's was the charm of a woman, and not of a girl. When it has been said that her charm lay not wholly in her beauty, and that it was as apparent to women as to men, perhaps more has been told than could be conveyed in pages of analysis and description.

"My dear Norah," said Mrs. Redcliffe, going forward to greet her. "I am so pleased to see you. I hope you didn't mind being put off for a quarter of an hour. How did you come up?"

"I walked, of course," she replied, shaking hands with Browne and Turner, and smiling impartially upon each of them. "There is a moon, and I didn't have to bring a lantern. My faithful Bridget will come and fetch me at half-past ten, and I shall walk back again."

"No, I shall drive you down," said Turner gallantly. "You and Bridget too. There will be room for all four."

"A walk on a night like this is very pleasant," put in Browne. "Let me take you home, Mrs. O'Keefe."

She laughed gaily. "I shouldn't think of taking you quite in the opposite direction from that in which you have to go," she said. "And how would you like to walk between me and Bridget? Thank you very much all the same, Mr. Browne."

"Indeed, I don't mind a walk on a night like this. I like it," he replied, with an eager expression on his round, red face.

"Then you won't mind walking up to Upper Heath,"

said Turner. "I'll drive Mrs. O'Keefe down, and go home through the wood."

"Well, we needn't settle about going home yet awhile," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "Let us go in. Dinner is ready."

CHAPTER II

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

THEY went in singly to the little square dining-room, and arranged themselves at a round table. A subsurface and quite seemly struggle between Browne and Turner as to which of them should sit next to Norah O'Keefe was decided by superior strategy in favour of the former, but the smallness of the company robbed Turner's defeat of most of its sting.

"You have been to Hurstbury Court," said Mrs. Redcliffe to Browne, when they had settled themselves in their places. "Have you any interesting news to tell us? How is Lady Wrotham bearing her loss?"

"Wonderful woman!" said Browne, with a side glance at the parlourmaid. "Simply full of energy, and beginning her life all over again as if she thoroughly enjoyed it."

"Of course," said Mrs. Redcliffe, "she was nearly twenty years younger than Lord Wrotham, and an energetic woman always. So one heard, for I have never seen her."

A remembrance came to Browne's mind. "Didn't you ever see her when the old lord was Governor of Western Australia?" he asked.

"No, never," she replied. "That was many years ago, and I was quite a girl. Besides, Queensland and Western Australia are a very long distance apart. I was never in Western Australia, and I do not think that Lord and Lady Wrotham were ever in Queensland. I have no recollection of it if they were."

She spoke in her usual placid, rather deliberate manner. Browne glanced at her quiet, sensible face, unclouded by a

hint of disturbance, and decided that he must have mistaken Lady Wrotham's meaning when she told him that she knew all about Mrs. Redcliffe. It was impossible to connect her with the remotest shadow of a scandal—a scandal, that is, in which she could have been in the least to blame.

"You have been here five years, haven't you, Mrs. Redcliffe?" asked Norah O'Keefe. "Hasn't Lady Wrotham ever been to Exton in that time?"

"No," said Mrs. Redcliffe, and Browne added, "She told me that she had not been here for five and twenty years. That was just after Sir Joseph had practically rebuilt the Abbey. She said that she thought he had completely spoilt it, and she had never had the slightest wish to see it again."

"Spoilt it!" exclaimed Hilda. "Why, it is perfectly beautiful!"

"Yes," said Browne. "But, you see, she came when it was only just finished. Everything was new and staring. I really hardly recognized the description she gave me of it, but I can see it to a certain extent with her eyes. The garden was brand new; twelve acres, or more, just planted. We know it after five and twenty years' growth, but in those days it can't have been very interesting. And the new part of the house hadn't toned down to look of a piece with the old, as it has now. She spent her honeymoon there. The house must have been very uncomfortable, only half-furnished; but there it was, with all its surroundings, just as it had been built after the Reformation, when most of the monastery had been pulled down. She will find it very different now."

"Is she coming to see it, then?" asked Mrs. Redcliffe.

"H'm, ha!" muttered Browne, recollecting the parlour-maid. "I expect she and Kemsing—I mean Lord Wrotham—will be down to have a look at us before long."

"Poor old Sir Joseph!" said Mrs. Redcliffe. "What a

pride he took in the place! It was a delight to go pottering round with him. I am sure he never thought of it as otherwise than his own."

"I really don't think he did," said Browne. "He spent money on it just as if it belonged to him, and, in a way, he has made it."

"Sir Joseph Chapman made the house, and Maximilian Browne made the estate," said Turner. "Honour where honour is due."

Browne's round face was suffused with a deprecatory smile. "I have pulled it round a bit," he said. "It's quite true. All the farms are let now, and as for the private houses—well, *I'm* quite satisfied with the tenants we've got." He looked round the table with a congratulatory air, finishing up with a side look at the tenant of the Street House, just long enough to turn a general compliment into a particular one.

Norah O'Keefe, however, seemed blissfully unconscious of it. "I hope the new Lord Wrotham is pleased with the result of your labours," she said; "yours and Sir Joseph's. He has reason to be."

"Oh, he's pleased enough," said Browne.

"And have you got a new tenant for the Abbey yet?" asked Hilda. "It will be rather an excitement to us, but we shall be very hard to please after dear old Sir Joseph."

The maid had now left the room. Browne gave vent to a premonitory cough, and said, "Well, the fact is that Lady Wrotham is coming to live here herself."

There was a general exclamation from all except Turner. Browne leaned back in his chair and enjoyed the commotion he had raised. It was at this moment that recollection came to Turner. Three pairs of feminine eyes were bent upon Browne's rubicund visage. Turner's turned with some curiosity on Mrs. Redcliffe. Her face was as interested as that of her daughter, or Mrs. O'Keefe. There was no trace of

any other expression on it. Like his friend, Turner dismissed from his mind once and for all any suspicion that there was anything Lady Wrotham could know about Mrs. Redcliffe that she would wish to be hidden.

"Now that we have heard that important piece of news," said Norah O'Keefe, when the first expression of surprise had died down, "we want to hear more about Lady Wrotham herself. None of us know her. If she is going to be our new neighbour, we want to know what she is like."

"You'll like her," said Browne loyally. The disturbance of mind he had admitted to Turner was not to be disclosed to any one else, not even to these three ladies with whom he lived on terms of considerable intimacy. "You'll like her. She is a wonderful woman. Full of energy—and of good works. She'll take the lead."

Mrs. O'Keefe made a slight grimace. "Will she take the lead of all of us?" she asked. "That looks rather as if our pleasant little society will be altered. None of us take the lead now. We are a small and very contented republic."

"Even old Sir Joseph was one of us," said Hilda. "He would come in and out just as he liked, and if we wanted to see him we went to the Abbey, and were always sure of a welcome. I suppose that will all be altered now, and we shall have to wait till we're sent for."

"There is one among us," said Turner dryly, "who is quite ready to take the lead."

Mrs. Redcliffe turned a reproving face on him. "Now you know that is not allowed," she said. "We all get on very well together, and there is not one of our neighbours that we are not always pleased to see—all of us."

"Please make an exception in my case," said Turner, unabashed.

"As long as we behave ourselves we are treated with favour," said Norah O'Keefe.

"And gracious condescension," added Hilda.

Browne's broad face showed some bewilderment. He was not at his ease with ellipsis. "I suppose you mean Mrs. Prentice," he said. "To tell you the truth, I'm afraid there may be a little friction between Lady Wrotham and Mrs. Prentice at first, though I shouldn't like it to be known that I said so. Her ladyship asked me a lot about the condition of the villagers. She means to take an active interest in them, as she does in the property at Hurstbury. Yes; I'm half afraid there may be a little friction."

"There'll be no friction," said Turner. "The lady in question will drop milk and honey in her talk, and all will be sweetness and submission."

"Now I can't have any more of this," said Mrs. Redcliffe decisively. "At this table we criticize nobody."

"Dear Mrs. Redcliffe," said Norah affectionately, "if all the world were as charitable as you, it would be a pleasanter place to live in."

"It would be a much worse place if we were all to give rein to our tongues in criticizing our neighbours," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "But tell us more about Lady Wrotham, Mr. Browne. We have not heard half enough yet."

But the entrance of the maid put a stop to further confidences for the time being, and, although the subject was returned to and discussed in all its bearings at intervals during the progress of the meal and later on in the evening, the conversation need not be further recorded.

The four elders played a rubber of Bridge after dinner, over which Turner was didactic, Browne sleepy and rather stupid, Mrs. O'Keefe erratic but charmingly apologetic, and Mrs. Redcliffe quietly capable. It was not a very rigorous game, and there was more general conversation in its intervals than would be looked upon with favour at the Portland Club, but it was enjoyed by those who took part in it and were accus-

tomed to fill up their sociable evenings in this manner. Hilda amused herself with the piano, and occasionally came to the table to look over her mother's hand, or that of Norah O'Keefe, and to give her opinion of the play when the hand was over.

It was a scene that would have pleased an observer—the little group of friends, so dissimilar, and yet at ease and contented with one another; the play of face and gesture over the game, and the little spurts of talk between whiles; the bright, comfortable room set in the warm heart of the country, now dead still in the quiet night, but homely in the sense of its closeness to the human dwellings it enwrapped. Nowhere is there to be found so complete a feeling of protection and neighbourliness as about a house in the country within reach of a village, even if no other human dwelling can be seen from its windows. The crowded proximity of a town affords little to compare with it. The lives of the town dweller's nearest neighbours are of no interest to him; perhaps their very faces are unknown. Scattered about the great city he has many friends, but they are divided from him by more than mere distance. He finds delight in his own hearthstone, but it is isolated. Let him shut the door on its warmth, and he is cut off from it completely; he is in another world. Its rays strike no further than the walls of his house. But if you shut the door for a moment on such a room as the parlour in the White House, and stand outside under the stars, the very silence of the night brings companionable thoughts. The brain is soothed by the stillness, and you know that not very far off are the houses, not of strangers, but of your neighbours, whose lives are near to you, although you may know very few of them. And your own house has a personality, partly its own, partly the echo of yours. It is familiar to every one of those who are living near you. It has its place in the picture of their surround-

ings, which exists as a background to all their thoughts. Some of them have had it before them to-night as they have sat and talked round their own fires. Some of them have it before them now as you stand there. It is a constant and living part of their experience. And so there is both the grateful retirement and the sense of being close to the heart of human life. What is there to compare with this about a house in a terrace, or a street, surrounded by alien life, completely negligible to the thoughts of those dwelling near it, or passing to and fro?

Mrs. O'Keefe's Irish maid arrived at half-past ten, and Turner's groom a quarter of an hour later. There was a little bustle of departure, and Turner drove off down to the village with Norah sitting beside him, and Bridget and Robert Kitcher in company on the back seat. Nothing much was said between the lady and gentleman during the short drive to the house in the village street at which the lady and her maid alighted, nothing at all that provided any interest for the pair who overheard it, but Turner's mind was full of a sardonic triumph. As he drove back again past the inn and the mill, across the bridge, past the Abbey gate and buildings, and across the little stretch of park which lay between them and the wood in which his own house lay, two miles distant from the village, he chuckled at intervals to himself as he thought of Browne trudging up the hill to Upper Heath House in his pumps, and pictured the muttered wrath of his rival at his own success in manœuvring a five minutes' *tête-à-tête* with the lady. "That's one to you, Thomas," he said aloud to the birds of night and to Robert Kitcher, sitting in respectful sympathy behind him; and again, "Poor old Maximilian, he hasn't got a look in. Thought he was very smart putting himself next to her at dinner. But she didn't look at him once. Ha, ha! You may put up your shutters, Mr. Browne."

When he had passed through the gate which enclosed the Abbey precincts, and that which gave entrance to the woodland road which he now had to follow, he fell silent for a time, and when he spoke again the current of his thoughts had changed. "I wonder if there's a good lot in this box," he said. "The last was poor." And then, "There's one of Anthony Hope's, anyhow. I saw it announced."

Presently they came out of the wood into a clearing, in which stood a white, verandahed house, looking down a gently sloping valley. The wind had dropped, and the night was full of the tinkle of running water. Stretching down the valley was Turner's chain of fish tanks, with streams, ditches, sluices, gates, and everything ingeniously ordered for the benefit of the industry to which he devoted his attention. The moon now rode high, and, as he turned for a moment to survey his little kingdom before entering the house, shone on the roofs of the huts scattered about at the head of the valley, on squares and oblongs and lines of water, dwindling in size until they were lost in the gloom of the surrounding trees. The scene had something strange in it. It might have reminded a traveller of something he had seen in out-of-the-way parts of the world, where men carry on unfamiliar operations in the depths of bush, or scrub, or jungle. But there was nothing strange in it to Turner, and, with a mere turn of the head, he passed into the house, while Kitcher, with no glance at all, led his horse round to the stable.

The room which Turner entered when he had hung up his coat and hat was attractive enough, although furnished without any regard to modern notions of æsthetics. It was attractive because of its extreme air of comfort. The easy-chairs in front of the fire were of the deepest, the Turkey carpet was as thick a one as could be bought for money, and its somewhat crude colours, finding nothing in the room to clash with, only added to its brightness. The room was

lighted by a bay window, which was now thickly curtained by warm-coloured hangings. A table stood in this window, on which was a spirit tantalus, glasses, mineral water, and a lemon squeezer containing a lemon ready to be operated upon. A copper kettle buzzed on the hob of the hearth, in which the fire glowed invitingly. By the side of one of the great, old easy-chairs stood another table, upon which was a green-shaded reading lamp, a paper-knife, a large tobacco jar, and half-a-dozen seasoned briar pipes. A black spaniel lay on the hearthrug, and wagged a welcoming stump as his master entered the room, watching out of the corner of a liquid brown eye for a sign as to whether it would be expected of him to disturb his ease to the extent of rising to offer a greeting.

But a stranger coming into the room would have looked first at none of these things. His eye would have been caught by the rows and rows of books which lined two of the walls from floor to ceiling. Many books are not an unusual appanage to a room of this sort, and the best way to house them is in fixed, open shelves. But these books and shelves were decidedly unusual. The shelves were all of one size, and the books were nearly of a size too, and most of them in bright bindings. A closer inspection, of the most cursory, would have revealed the fact that they were all novels, of the sort that is issued in great numbers every year, and sold at the price of six shillings, or four and sixpence with the usual discount. The total number on Turner's shelves must have reached four figures, and very curious they looked in their long, unbroken ranks, not at all like the books of an ordinary library. In the middle of the floor stood a good-sized box, from which the lid had been removed. This, also, was full of books. Turner took them out and arranged them on another table which stood by the door, reading the lettering on the cover of each one as he did so. They had not come from

a circulating library, but from a bookseller, and all of them were new, as they had left the binders. There were between twenty and thirty of them, and their owner looked at them with satisfaction. "It's a good week," he said, as he put the last in its place by the others. "We're getting into the thick of the season now."

He went up-stairs to his bedroom, and returned a few minutes later. He had taken off his collar and tie, and his tall form looked odd and old-fashioned in an ancient Paisley shawl dressing-gown, with a pair of worked slippers just as ancient beneath it. He went up to the line of books on the table and selected one, which he put by the reading-lamp. "Don't care about anything hot to-night," he said, as he went to the other table, and mixed whisky and soda in a long glass. The old dog in front of the fire wagged his stump of a tail sleepily, thinking himself addressed.

Turner stood in front of the fire while he carefully filled a pipe out of the big tobacco jar, and surveyed his orderly book-shelves with a look of gratification. Then his face became reflective. "No, it would never do," he burst out at last. "Never do. First thing that would happen—this would be knocked off. You're very well off, Thomas Turner. Don't make a fool of yourself." Then he lit his pipe, and said between the puffs, "Maximilian—Browne—very lucky—fellow."

Turner was now prepared for his night's debauch. He put some logs of wood and a shovelful of coal on to the fire, took a large, fat cushion from the easy-chair, settled himself in it, with his legs on another chair, placed the cushion on his stomach, and on the cushion the book which he had selected from his supply, and began to read. After that there was silence in the room for something like three hours, broken only by the regular turning over of the leaves, the fall of a coal, or the stirring of the old dog in his dreams. At intervals

Turner would lay down the book, and fill another pipe, or get himself up out of the chair to replenish the fire. Then he would return to his reading with renewed zest, and so the hours crept on until it was getting on for three o'clock in the morning. At last he came to the final page, and rising, stretched himself with a yawn. "That's a capital one," he said. "Couldn't tell what was coming till half-way through. I haven't got many more like that, I'm afraid. Come along, Cæsar; time we went to bed." He lit a candle, turned out the lamp, and went up-stairs, followed slowly by the old dog.

Nearly four hours before, Maximilian Browne had stumped up the hill from the White House to Upper Heath in his pumps, as Turner had pictured him. He had also sworn lustily and aloud as he walked, his good-humoured face distorted with annoyance. By the time he reached his house he was in a rather more equable mood. There were few books in the room which he entered, but it was as comfortable a bachelor's den, in its way, as Turner's. He was welcomed by three fox-terriers, in whose company he smoked a pipe before retiring to rest, and read an article in the *Field*, with most of which he found himself in substantial agreement. He was in bed and snoring by half-past eleven. The last words he said to himself as he laid his head on the pillow were, "Well, I don't know why I should make such a fuss. After all, he's welcome."

CHAPTER III

THE VICARAGE

THE Reverend William Prentice sat at one end of the vicarage breakfast-table, and his wife, behind the tea-cups, at the other. The Vicar was a man of about fifty years of age. His clean-shaven face was not unattractive. There was a hint of obstinacy about the set of the jaw, which was heavier than the thinness of brow and cheekbone seemed to demand, but the mouth was amiable. Mr. Prentice, perhaps, would have liked to hear it said that he had the face of an ascetic. It had some slight indications that way, but stopped short at the half-way house of clericalism.

Mr. Prentice undoubtedly succeeded in conveying the idea of being clerical, and the shape of his collar and waistcoat, and the various metal tokens he displayed on his watch-chain would no doubt have informed an observer, skilled in reading such signs, exactly what his views were likely to be upon any question of ecclesiastical interest that might be discussed before him. He did not look as if any considerable trouble had ever befallen him, and his lines now certainly seemed to have fallen in pleasant places.

Mrs. Prentice was not more than forty-five. She too was thin; thin in her upright, active body; thin in her face, with a thin, straight nose, and thin, tight lips; and, her critics would probably have added, with a thin, but rigid, intelligence.

"Bacon, my dear?" said her husband, uncovering the dish in front of him.

"No, thank you," said Mrs. Prentice, in a tone which meant more than her words. It was the season of Lent, and

Mrs. Prentice was fasting, on a principle of her own, and liked it to be known that she was doing so.

Mr. Prentice helped himself apologetically from the dish. He, also, was fasting, on a principle of his own, which did not involve the loss of his morning bacon. He had to keep up his strength.

"I have heard from Freddy," said Mrs. Prentice, putting down a letter she had been reading by the side of her plate. "He will be down for Easter." Frederick Prentice was the only child of the Vicar of Exton, and there was an expression on his mother's face, as she mentioned his name, which seemed to show that he filled a large proportion of any tender place which might exist in her heart. The Vicar's face grew no softer at her statement; perhaps it became a trifle more severe.

"I shall be glad to see Fred," he said. "He honours us very little with his presence, and there are things that I wish to say to him."

The look of pleasure disappeared from Mrs. Prentice's face. "How can you expect him to be always running down here, William?" she said, rather sharply. "He has his work to do, and the journey is expensive."

"He does no work on Sunday," retorted the Vicar, "and I expect very little on Saturday. I very much doubt whether he is doing as much as he ought on the other days of the week. And we know that he does pay visits, and makes longer journeys to do so than he would have to if he came home."

"You are talking of when he went into Devonshire to shoot with Sir George Sheepshanks. I think it was wise of him to do that. It is not every young man reading for the bar who is asked to the country house of a judge."

"I dare say not," returned the Vicar, relinquishing the point. "But, at any rate, his extravagant habits still con-

tinue. I received a bill from his tailor for quite a large amount only two days ago, and ——"

"Why did you not tell me of it?"

"I did not wish to trouble you until I had thought over what could be done. It is absurd to send in the bill to me, and I am certainly not going to make myself responsible any further for Fred's debts. He has a good allowance, but he is evidently greatly exceeding it. Before we know where we are, we shall have another financial crisis."

"After all, William, you have not had to pay his debts. I know he was very extravagant at Oxford, but the punishment has fallen on his own shoulders."

"That is not the right way to put it, Agatha. His godfather left him two thousand pounds, with the object of helping him through his education, and so forth. His trustees, of whom I am one, have absolute discretion as to how it should be used for his benefit; but he was not to have it, or any portion of it, for his own use until he is twenty-five."

"I know all that."

"I don't think you know the meaning of it. I was very anxious to keep the sum, with the interest that had accrued to it, intact until he should really need it for some definite purpose. As you know, I paid for his education entirely myself, and am prepared to make him an adequate allowance until he is able to make a living. He piled up tremendous debts at Oxford, and more than half his legacy has gone to pay them off. And it looks to me as if he were beginning again in the same way. The fact is that he looks upon this money as a margin up to which he can spend. It is nothing to him that he will exhaust it in this foolish way. It is not honest, and it seems nonsense to talk about the punishment falling on his own shoulders."

Mrs. Prentice bridled. "I hope you will not talk of what I say being nonsense," she said. "It does not appear to be

nonsense to me. I do not defend Fred for his extravagance at Oxford; although, of course, as he said at the time, two hundred and fifty pounds a year is a small allowance at a college like Magdalen. But the money that paid his debts is his own, and if he has already spent it, or part of it, he will lose the benefit of it in the future. You can't have your cake and eat it too."

A dull flash of annoyance mounted the Vicar's cheeks. "I am quite aware of that fact, Agatha," he said, with voice slightly raised. "But you forget entirely what I have done for Fred. It would have been quite within my powers as trustee—indeed, it is what Mr. Goldsmith intended—to have paid for his Oxford career out of his legacy, and also for his expenses while reading for the bar. I took a pride in not doing so, but I might just as well have kept the money in my pocket. And as for two hundred and fifty pounds a year being a poor allowance for an undergraduate, let me tell you that it is a very good allowance. I did very well myself on two hundred, and left the university without a pennyworth of debt."

"But you were not at Magdalen," persisted Mrs. Prentice. "The standard of living there is higher, and Fred was popular. As I say, I don't defend his extravagance, but I should have been sorry if he had not been able to live on equal terms with his fellow undergraduates."

"Who for the most part are a good deal above him in social status," interrupted the Vicar. "I am aware that that gives you considerable satisfaction. I must say that it gives me very little. I should have thought more highly of Fred if he had lived with the men of his own standing, and kept within his quite ample allowance. There is an old proverb about brass and earthenware pots which you may remember."

"I hope I am very far from being a snob, as you seem to imply, William," said Mrs. Prentice; "but I cannot forget that my family is an old and distinguished one, and ——"

"And that you came down in the world when you married me," interrupted her husband. "I know you can't. And I can't forget that your assumptions of high ancestry rest on very slight evidence. However, I am not going into that question now. I have received a bill from Fred's tailors of no less than eighty pounds odd. I say it is nothing less than scandalous that such a bill should be forthcoming a year after he was freed of debt and started clear again. What is to be done about it?"

The magnitude of the sum surprised Mrs. Prentice enough to turn her thoughts from the side-issue into which the conversation had been directed. "Is it as much as that?" she asked. "There must be some mistake."

"I am afraid that I have very little hope of it; but if it is so, Fred will no doubt let me know. I shall write to the tailors and tell them that I am not the person to whom my son's accounts should be sent. He is of age, and I am not responsible for them. And there I suppose I must leave it till Fred comes home. I shall talk to him very seriously, and I hope I may rely upon your doing the same, Agatha."

Mrs. Prentice replied that he might so rely on her, but without exhibiting any great amount of indignation, and there was silence for a time at the vicarage breakfast-table.

Presently Mrs. Prentice said, "I hear that Mrs. Redcliffe had a dinner party last night. I do think, William, that after all you have said in the pulpit and elsewhere about the duties of Lent, it is a little too bad that she should set your opinions at defiance so far as to choose a Friday night for her entertainment."

"A dinner party?" repeated the Vicar. "It was hardly that, was it? Mrs. O'Keefe told me that she was going to dine at the White House. I did not gather that it was to be a dinner party."

"You might have known, I think, that wherever Mrs.

O'Keefe went, Mr. Browne would be hanging on her skirts, and, of course, that odious Captain Turner as well. I certainly call a party of five a dinner party, and I have no doubt that they played cards afterwards—for money. How can you possibly expect the villagers to take to heart what you say, and to learn something of the duties which the Church teaches, when such an example is set them? I do think, William, that it is your duty to see Mrs. Redcliffe and to remonstrate with her on the subject."

"I hardly think I should like to do that, Agatha," said the Vicar quietly.

"And pray why not? I do all that I can to help you in these matters, for I think them of the greatest importance. How can I ask the children to give up sugar during Lent, and the women gossiping, and the men tobacco, when those who ought to set them an example are allowed to act as they please with impunity? It is most uphill work as it is. Try as I may to set an example in these things myself, a mere handful follows me, and out of those that do, or say they do, I could not put my finger on one who does not expect to get some substantial return for it. I think Mrs. Redcliffe deserves remonstrance, and ought to get it."

"Well, perhaps you had better remonstrate with her yourself," said the Vicar pleasantly; and Mrs. Prentice resolved that she would, but did not publish her intention.

She set out on her errand an hour later, after attending to various household duties, and took the road to the White House, with a sense of expectation not wholly allied to religious aspiration.

Mrs. Redcliffe was wandering round her flower borders in company with her daughter. The wind of the previous night had died away, and the day was warm and sunny. The reviving life of Spring seemed to be making growth that was almost visible in the mild air. The daffodils, planted in great

drifts of gold under the trees of the wilder parts of the garden, made it bright with colour, and the early flowers in the borders were already ushering in that long procession of bloom which would only end with the far-off days of late autumn. The birds sang lustily on this fine spring morning, and Mrs. Redcliffe's garden was a pleasant place for a stroll of inspection.

Mrs. Prentice walked across the grass towards them. "She has come to be unpleasant," whispered Hilda, regarding her approach, but Mrs. Redcliffe went forward to meet her with a smile of welcome.

"Isn't this a delightful little burst of Spring?" she said. "We were just going up into the shrub garden. Do come with us."

But Mrs. Prentice was not to be moved from her purpose. "I should like to say a few words to you," she said primly.

Hilda's face grew antagonistic, and she kept her hold on her mother's arm as Mrs. Redcliffe replied, "Then let us go in and sit down. We can come out again afterwards."

The doors of the pleasant sitting-room were wide open to the garden. Hilda showed no signs of leaving the two elder women to themselves as they went across the lawn towards the house, but Mrs. Redcliffe gently disengaged her arm. "Go and pick me a big bunch of daffodils," she said—"the Horsfeldii," and Hilda left them.

Mrs. Prentice showed slight signs of nervousness as she seated herself facing Mrs. Redcliffe, who waited quietly for her to begin. "I called to see you in a friendly way," she began, with some hesitation—"I hope you will not misunderstand me; it is so important that those of us in a position to exercise influence should see eye to eye in matters of Church discipline, and—well, my husband has been preaching about the duties of Lent, and I thought I would ask if you could see your way to—to uphold me and the Vicar in—in our endeavours to——" She tailed off into ineffective silence. It

was not at all the opening she had intended to use as she had walked up to the White House, but, confronted by Mrs. Redcliffe's calm, steady eyes, she had felt impelled to dispense with her intended air of remonstrance.

"In your endeavours to—what?" asked Mrs. Redcliffe.

"To set an example in the way of Lenten observance," said Mrs. Prentice, gathering courage.

A slight smile was apparent in Mrs. Redcliffe's face. "What particular example of Lenten observance do you allude to?" she asked.

Mrs. Prentice was nettled by the smile, and recovered her assurance. "I refer," she said, "to the practice of giving dinner parties on a Friday. It is one of the things that, in my own house, I am very particular about. For years I have made it a practice never to dine out, or to ask people to dinner on a Friday throughout the year. I do not say that I make a strict rule of it except in Lent. Then I make it the strictest rule."

"Well, Mrs. Prentice," said the other lady, "your rules for your own household are no concern of mine, and you will forgive me for saying plainly that my rules for my household are no concern of yours—or of the Vicar's. We shall be none the worse friends, I hope, if we recognize that our views upon all matters are not quite the same, and leave one another to act as each thinks best. Shall we go into the garden now?"

She rose from the sofa on which she had been sitting, but Mrs. Prentice kept her seat. "But surely," she cried, leaning forward, "you do not deny the right of the Church to lay down rules for our guidance!"

"I deny the right of another woman to make rules for my guidance," replied Mrs. Redcliffe. "Come, Mrs. Prentice, let us go into the garden."

She spoke evenly, her grey eyes fixed upon her visitor with no unkindness, no resentment, but steadily regarding her.

The words were said in a manner that made it possible to ignore the rebuke which they contained, or, at any rate, not actively to resent it. Mrs. Prentice decided so to take them. She would willingly have said more, but found it impossible to do so with the other standing calmly before her, waiting for her to rise. She got up from her chair, and Mrs. Redcliffe turned to the open door. "You have heard the great news, I suppose," she said as they went out together, "the news that has come to Exton?"

Mrs. Prentice did not like to acknowledge that any news of importance which had to do with Exton was unknown to her, but she was feeling a trifle shaken by the way her remonstrance had been returned to her, and said, without fencing, "No; what is that?"

"Lady Wrotham is coming to settle down at the Abbey."

"Lady Wrotham? The Abbey?" exclaimed Mrs. Prentice. "Oh, but are you sure that is the case? I have heard nothing of it."

"Very likely not," returned Mrs. Redcliffe. "Mr. ——"

"And surely I should have heard of it," interrupted Mrs. Prentice; "I or the Vicar, if it had been likely. I think there must be some mistake."

Hilda Redcliffe came across the lawn and joined them. She had a great sheaf of daffodils in the basket on her arm.

"Thank you, darling," said her mother. "Put them down by the door. Mrs. Prentice quite refuses to believe Mr. Browne's news about Lady Wrotham."

"Oh?" said Hilda, regarding that lady with no great favour.

"Mr. Browne? Does the information come from him?" asked Mrs. Prentice.

"Yes. He dined with us last night, you know. He had just come back from Hurstbury."

Mrs. Prentice blinked at the calm mention of the Friday evening dinner.

"That accounts, then, for our not being the first to hear of it," she said. "I have no doubt that Lady Wrotham will write to me—or to the Vicar, if she has not already done so."

"Do you know Lady Wrotham?" asked Hilda, with clear, antagonistic eyes.

"My dear Hilda," returned Mrs. Prentice, "Lord Wrotham presented the Vicar to this living. He would hardly have been likely to have done so to a stranger."

"Oh," said Hilda again.

"Have you ever been to Hurstbury Court?" asked Mrs. Redcliffe. There was no hint of malice in her tone, but she must have known that had Mrs. Prentice ever been at Hurstbury Court she would have heard of it.

"Well—not exactly," said Mrs. Prentice hesitatingly. "I have never been able to leave home at the time Lady Wrotham asked—might have asked—us there. Of course, we should have gone to the funeral if it had been at Hurstbury; but up in Northumberland—it is such a long journey; and, what with Lent coming, and one thing and another, the Vicar and I could hardly spare the time. I do not think that Lady Wrotham minded."

"I shouldn't think she would in the least," said Hilda. "What is she like, Mrs. Prentice? Is she tall or short, stout or thin, stately or meek? We want to know all about her now she is coming to live here."

"I think you had better wait and form your own judgment, Hilda," replied Mrs. Prentice. "It is possible that Lady Wrotham may wish to live in absolute retirement here, so soon after her loss. But in time no doubt she will hope to know something of the people on the Manor."

"But, of course, you will be going to the Abbey from the first," said Hilda, "as you are a friend of Lady Wrotham's."

"The Vicar and I will naturally be seeing her," said Mrs. Prentice. "But I did not say I was a friend of Lady Wro-

tham's, Hilda. I can hardly claim to be that. She very seldom comes to Exton, and——"

"Mr. Browne said she had not been here for five and twenty years," said Hilda.

"Is it as long as that? Did—did Mr. Browne say when she intended to come here?"

"He did not say," replied Mrs. Redcliffe. "But I gathered that it would be before long."

"Ah! Well, of course, we shall be hearing all her plans. Now I am afraid I must be going off. Good-bye, Mrs. Redcliffe. The garden is getting to look lovely. Good-bye, Hilda. By the bye, you will be pleased to hear that Fred is coming down for Easter."

Hilda looked away for a moment across the park.

"Oh," she said again, coldly, but her cheeks were a little red.

They had reached the gate, and Mrs. Prentice took herself off down the road, while the mother and daughter turned to continue their stroll.

"What did she want, mother?" asked Hilda. "I am sure it was something disagreeable by her face."

"It was not very agreeable," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "She made a mistake in coming, but she was actuated by a sense of duty."

"She is one of those people whose sense of duty always makes them impertinent," said Hilda, out of her twenty years' experience. "I think she is an odious woman, mother. How snobbish of her to pretend she is a friend of Lady Wrotham's, when it was quite plain that she had never set eyes on her."

"You must not talk in that way, dear. She did not say she was a friend. She said she was not."

"She meant that we should think it. Where can she have met Lady Wrotham? She has never been to Hurstbury, and

she has not seen her here. She is a snob, mother, and you cannot say she is not. And she is impertinent and interfering too. What did she want to see you about?"

"We won't go into that, dear," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "And I don't want you to become hostile to Mrs. Prentice. She is a good woman according to her lights, and if they are not quite the same as ours we must make allowances. It would be very disagreeable in a small place like this if we were to take to quarrelling."

"I can't pretend to like Mrs. Prentice, mother, and it is difficult to have ordinary patience with her."

"I do not find it difficult."

The girl turned and put her arms round her mother's neck. "Darling mother," she said, "you are sweet and good to everybody, and yet I know you can see their bad points as well as I can. I will take a lesson from you."

Mrs. Prentice went down the road, turning over in her mind the important piece of news she had just heard. It quite eclipsed the remembrance, which would otherwise have filled her thoughts, of the purpose of her visit to the White House, and its result. When she reached the vicarage she went straight into her husband's study. He was at work on his sermons for the next day, and was not usually interrupted on a Saturday morning, even by his wife. He looked up, with a shade of annoyance on his face, which changed into a look of interest as she disclosed her news.

"I do think," she said, "that we—that you ought to have been the first to hear of this."

"I don't know why," said the Vicar. "Neither you nor I have ever met Lady Wrotham in our lives, and it seems to me quite natural that Browne should have been told of her decision."

"Then I think Mr. Browne ought to have told us first

One hardly likes to have to acknowledge to Mrs. Redcliffe that one has heard nothing of an important change of this sort, which, of course, affects us more than anybody. It was probably all over the village this morning, and it would have been a pretty thing if one of the tradespeople, for instance, had mentioned it to me, and I had known nothing of it."

"I really don't think I should worry about a little thing like that, Agatha, if I were you. It is small-minded."

"I don't agree with you, William. You know how very ready people are here to belittle us, if they get the slightest chance."

"If it is so, it must be something in ourselves that causes them to do it. As a priest, I ought to be the servant of my parishioners. I have no wish to set myself up as their leader —except, of course, in matters of religion."

"And it is just in those matters that they slight your claims. Would you believe it, that Mrs. Redcliffe had the effrontery to tell me that, in matters of Church discipline, she acted entirely by her own rule?"

"How did you manage to get on to such a subject as that with her? You—surely, Agatha, you did not go up to the White House to tax her with having one or two people to dine with her last night?"

"That is just what I did do, William. You suggested that I should do so yourself."

The Vicar rose from his chair with an exclamation of impatience. "It is really too bad," he said, pacing to and fro along the room. "How could you take it upon yourself to do a thing like that? You know perfectly well that I made no such suggestion."

"Excuse me, William, but you did. You refused to do it yourself, as I think you ought to have done, and you said, distinctly, 'You had better go up to the White House yourself.'"

"Perhaps I did, and it must have been quite obvious that I said so in the way of—what shall I say?—sarcasm—chaff. You know it was the last thing I should have countenanced. I suppose the fact is that Mrs. Redcliffe told you to mind your own business, and I must say I'm not surprised at it. You make my position very difficult with such interference as that; which, in any case, would be quite unwarrantable."

"I am very sorry you view the matter in that light, William. I think you are grossly unfair to me. I do all I possibly can to support you in the village, and I did not *tax* Mrs. Redcliffe, as you call it. I talked to her as one woman can to another, or, at any rate, ought to be able to do. You have no cause to be annoyed with me. I own I might as well have saved my breath. Mrs. Redcliffe is not a good Churchwoman. Her views I consider *most* lax on many matters of great importance, and I might have known that she would not have listened to reason on a question of this sort."

"Mrs. Redcliffe is a very good woman—most charitable and kind-hearted in every way."

"Kind-hearted! If you think *that* is a substitute for Christianity—however, we had better say no more about it. I shall certainly never open my mouth again to Mrs. Redcliffe on such matters."

"Nor to any one else, I hope. If I thought it to be my duty to speak to any of the people living about here upon a serious matter, I should not shrink from it. But it is not possible—you ought to know it is not possible—to interfere with the way people choose to conduct their lives in minor points. They only resent it, and no good is done. I preach what I conceive to be the better way. The responsibility rests with them whether they take it or no. You must promise me not to interfere in this way again."

"I don't want to go against you, William. I only want to

assist you in your endeavours to make the people better. If I have made a mistake, I am sorry for it. You do not object, of course, to my giving advice to the poor people?"

The corners of the Vicar's mouth curled into a smile. "You know pretty well what I object to," he said.

CHAPTER IV

LORD WROTHAM

THE fine weather which came in with the great winds of March continued without intermission until after Easter. The air was warm, and sweet with the scent of fertile soil, exuding odours of Spring. Only the bare branches of the trees gave warning that the time of the good days had not yet arrived, and that there was cold, dull weather to come, before this pleasant heat and sunshine could be looked for of right.

One morning just before Easter, Maximilian Browne, with an open telegram on the breakfast-table before him, was giving anxious instructions to the servant who stood by his side.

"And tell Mrs. Mitten to be sure to be punctual," he was saying. "We shall not have much time for lunch. His lordship will want to drive round the Manor, and he goes back at five o'clock. Tell her to have everything as nice as possible."

"Very good, sir," said Mitten. "You will want the cart at half-past nine, I suppose."

"Er—no—nine o'clock. I—there may be something to see to at the office."

There was nothing to see to at the office, or if there was Browne changed his mind about seeing to it on his way to the station, for he drove through the village without stopping. Above the bridge and the mill-sluice the tidal river widened into a great stretch of water, fringed with brown reeds. Across it the grey pile of the Abbey could be seen through and above the trees, a fine house, modernized, but with great care. Its many windows were blind, and the flag-staff stood naked on the tower. To the right were the houses and cottages of

the village, with red, lichen-covered roofs and chimney-stacks, picturesque in their irregularity. Browne, whose waking thoughts were mostly concerned with Exton Manor, reflected as he drove along the road by the lake that its owners had hitherto showed little interest in this portion of their heritage. "I would rather have Exton than Hurstbury and Shelbraith put together," he said to himself as he looked across the shining water.

He drove on for a mile or more along a country road, until a steep dip brought him to a gate, at which Exton Manor ended and the forest began. Then his road lay between great trees and stretching forest glades, across a clear stream and out on to an open heath, again under trees, and finally across a wide expanse of moor, bounded by blue hills and purple woodlands. At a distance of a mile across the moor huddled the little group of new red-brick buildings which marked the railway station, dumped down in the middle of the heather.

The road was straight, with one or two steep dips. Reaching the top of one of these, Browne saw far away in front of him a black spot, which looked like a closed carriage, nearing the station. He quickened the pace of his horse, and, before he reached the end of the straight stretch of road, met an empty brougham being driven back in the direction of Exton. He gave the reins to his groom, and went through the booking-office, and out on to the platform. On the other side of the line Norah O'Keefe, in travelling costume, was walking up and down. Her maid stood by a little pile of luggage, but the mistress was not left alone on that account, for pacing up and down with her was Captain Thomas Turner.

Browne's face fell perceptibly, but he made his way across the line and joined the pair. "Lord Wrotham is coming down by the 10.15 train," he said with some haste, when he had shaken hands with both of them. "I've come to meet him."

"It's only half-past nine," said Turner. "You'll have a long time to wait."

"Where are you off to?" inquired Browne, regarding him with an eye of suspicion.

"Taking some fish to Troutbridge," replied Turner promptly.

"Thought you weren't going till to-morrow?"

"No, I'm going to-day."

"Captain Turner is going to keep me company as far as Greathampton," said Norah, anxious to avoid a bickering match.

"Very kind of him," said Browne. "I suppose you don't mind travelling third-smoking. That's what he generally goes."

"Are your clocks fast?" inquired Turner. "Seems a funny thing allowing an hour and a quarter for a five-mile drive."

"Is Lord Wrotham coming to stay here?" interrupted Norah.

"No. Just coming for the day to have a look round," replied Browne grumpily.

"I'm glad of that," she said. "I shouldn't like to have missed him. Tell him how excited we all are at the prospect of seeing him."

"I don't suppose we shall see much of him when Lady Wrotham comes here," said Browne. "He is giving the place over to her entirely as long as she lives here."

"And I shall be away when she comes, I suppose. I am not coming back for a month, you know. I'm such a wretched sailor that when I do make up my mind to cross to Ireland I like to stay there."

"Well, we shall all miss you very much, Mrs. O'Keefe," said Browne earnestly. "The days will be long enough till you come back again."

"Very well put," commented Turner. "I say, Browne, if you've got any business to look after here, don't let's keep you. I can see that Mrs. O'Keefe's all right."

"I haven't got anything to do, thanks," replied Browne shortly. "Are you sure your beastly fish won't drown, left on a truck like that? I should go and jog them up if I were you."

He pointed to where two rows of curiously-shaped closed cans were arranged on a station trolley at the end of the platform. It may be explained for the benefit of the uninitiated that, unless the water in these cans were kept aërated by the jolting of wagon or train during their journey, the fish would die before they got to the end of it.

"The train will be here in a minute," said Turner. "It's signalled. They'll be all right till then, thanks. If you think they want it, you might give the truck a run down to the other end. I'll time you."

"I never saw anything like you two for quarrelling," said Norah, as Browne turned his back on this ribald suggestion without deigning a reply. "And yet I know you are the very best of friends—David and Jonathan, in fact."

"Exton is a small place," said Turner. "It don't do to be too particular."

The train arriving cut short a further interchange of compliments. Turner handed Mrs. O'Keefe into a first-class carriage, and busied himself mightily with her comfort. The train went off again, and Browne raised his cap, as a fair face framed in furs, and a thin, sardonic one opposite to it, were borne out of his sight. He turned away with an angry exclamation. "Can't make out how I stand that fellow," he said to himself, as he walked down the platform. "Fact is, he's knocked all of a heap when he's with the lady—any lady. Don't know how to behave himself decently. Most offensive trait in a fellow's character. Silly ass!"

He crossed over to the down platform. There were still three-quarters of an hour to wait, and Browne was not a good waiter. He got through the time somehow. He had a conversation with the station-master, who was sowing seeds in his vegetable garden, and another with a chicken-raising porter. Then he went across to the station hotel and talked to the landlord, becoming so interested in a discussion on the advisability of starting a society for improving the breed of forest ponies, that the train he was awaiting came in as he was still talking, and he had to run across to the station.

He arrived in time to see a young man who had just alighted standing on the platform and looking about him. He was not particularly distinguished in appearance, except for a look of pleasant good-nature, agreeable enough. He was not above the middle height, but had a slim, active figure, which made him appear tall. He wore a loose tweed overcoat, and was smoking a briar pipe.

"Ah, here you are," he said, as Browne came panting on to the platform. "How are you? Air's nice and fresh down here. Ticket? Here you are, sonny. I'll keep the other half. Jove! this seems an out-of-the-way place for a station. That's a nice-looking nag of yours, Browne. Want to be off, eh, old girl? Well, we shan't keep you long."

They drove out of the station yard and across the brown heath. "About four miles, isn't it?" inquired Lord Wrotham.

"Just under four to the Abbey gates," said Browne. "But you've been here before, haven't you?"

"Not since I was a kiddy. I hardly remember the place at all. Quite exciting to have a look at it again. Jolly pretty place, isn't it? Everybody says so."

"It's the prettiest place *I've* ever seen," replied Browne. "I was only saying to myself as I came along, I'd rather have Exton than Hurstbury and Shelbraith put together."

"Would you now? Well, of course there's plenty to do here. Still, with the shooting let, I don't know."

"You could get the shooting back if you wanted it. Ferraby only holds it on a yearly tenancy."

"Yes. Well, of course, I did think of it. I'm not deadly keen on Hurstbury. Too big a house for a bachelor to keep up. But her ladyship had the choice, and she seemed to think she could make herself fairly comfortable down here."

"She ought to be able to. The house is in tip-top order. Old Sir Joseph didn't care what he spent on it. He's improved it a lot."

"Any people about for her to boss?"

Browne had known Lord Wrotham since his schooldays, and was not so much startled at this speech as otherwise he might have been.

"There are some big houses round," he said. "None very near."

"Oh, I don't mean them. I mean the people in the village. What's the parson like? Is he low?"

"No. I believe not. I'm not much on those questions, myself; but a pal told me he was high."

"Well, then, he won't suit her ladyship. If he's got any fight in him you'll have some sport. We might have a bet on it. I haven't seen the parson, but I'm willing to risk it, and lay you two to one on the Mater."

Browne laughed. "I expect you would win," he said. "But look here, Kemsing—Lord Wrotham, I——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake don't begin my lording me," interrupted the young man. "I get quite enough of that."

"You're my employer," said Browne, with a comfortable chuckle.

"Yes; and I'll sack you if you don't do what you're told. Well?"

"I wish you'd see if you could manage to give her ladyship

a hint—you know, just in the ordinary course of conversation —I tried to do it myself, but I couldn't see my way—don't let her think it comes from me ——"

"Go on. What sort of a hint?"

"Well, we're rather a happy little family down here. I'm jolly glad of it. I've been careful of the tenants I've got here, and they're a nice lot, taking them all round. If she could—well, of course, I don't want her to inconvenience herself—I mean, if she waited a bit—you know, just till she saw what sort of people they were on the Manor, before—before ——"

"Before she begins to ramp around? My stout friend, there's a parable somewhere, although I dare say you have never heard of it, about the leopard changing his spots."

"I have heard of it. It's in the Bible."

"Very well, then. Your happy family must either set its back up—in which case there'll be trouble—or it must knock under from the first."

"That might save the trouble, but ——"

"Oh, no, it wouldn't. There'll be trouble in any case."

"I was going to say that I don't think all of them would do it."

"You've got a few fighters, have you? It will make all the better sport. Who are the people living here? Tell me about 'em. There's the Vicar. He's high. Will he come off his perch, or stay up there to be shot at?"

"He's a nice fellow, Prentice. He'll hate being interfered with, though. And Mrs. Prentice will hate it worse. Don't care for her much. She's the only woman hereabouts that tries to make mischief."

"Well, that's two of 'em. Who else?"

"There's—er—Mrs. Redcliffe at the White House. We enlarged it for her. One of the best. Quiet, but pretty firm. I should think her ladyship might like her—but, by

the bye, she said she knew all about her. Do you know how?"

"Never heard of her. Widow?"

"Yes; with one daughter."

"Nice girl?"

"Charming girl. Then there's Turner, who has the Fisheries—Captain Turner; he was in the Buffs. Queer stick, but a good fellow. He don't go to church much, though."

"He'll have to alter that. Who else?"

"There's a very nice lady, Mrs. O'Keefe, at Street House."

"O'Keefe! What O'Keefe?"

"Her husband was a brother of Lord Ballyshannon. He was killed in South Africa."

"What, poor old Paddy O'Keefe? In the Grenadiers? I was at Eton with him. She's quite young then?"

"Oh, yes. Lady Wrotham did hint to me that I had let the place to her cheap on that account."

"Oh, no she didn't, old man. That isn't her way. She taxed you with it outright."

"Well, yes, she did. But I need scarcely tell you, Kemsing, that such a thing never entered my head."

"Of course not, old boy. You'd much rather have had an old lady, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know about that. At any rate, there she is, and she's a great acquisition to the place."

"Pretty, eh?"

"Ye-es. She's certainly good-looking, and very charming, and all that. I don't know when I've met a nicer woman. 'Course, there's nothing in what Lady Wrotham hinted at, far as I'm concerned. Too old for that sort of thing now. Still, I suppose I'm not too old to take pleasure in the society of a charming woman."

"By Jove, no, old man! You're as young as the rest of

us. Do other people take pleasure in her society—Turner, for instance?"

"Oh, he's a perfect fool about her. Rather ridiculous in a man of his age—and appearance. Bores her to death, too. Always hanging about her."

"Ho, ho, my young friend! I think I see daylight."

"Eh—what?"

"Rivals, and a touch of the green-eyed one."

"I don't know what you mean, Kemsing. She hasn't got green eyes. They are violet, and one of the best things about her. And as for rivals, Turner's welcome, as far as I'm concerned. I've told him that if he marries her I'll be his best man. That shows that I've got no plans of the sort for myself; I think you'll acknowledge that. For goodness' sake, don't put that idea into Lady Wrotham's head, or we shall have no end of a bother."

"Don't you fear me, Browne. I won't make mischief. You'll have quite enough as it is. What's this place?"

They were approaching the gate which divided the forest from the Manor. On a gentle rise to the right, facing a sloping meadow, and backed by a great bank of trees, stood a house of no great pretensions to beauty, but of some importance, with its well-kept flower garden and spacious outbuildings.

"That's Forest Lodge. Ferraby rents it."

"Oh, that's Ferraby's place, is it? I suppose they are not here much?"

"Only two or three months in the year. They 'liven us up a bit when they do come. But I'm not at all sure that they will hit it off with Lady Wrotham."

"Probably not. They are of the earth, earthy. How far are we from Exton now?"

"Getting on for two miles. This is Forest Farm. It goes

with the Lodge. Of course, you know, we're in the Manor now."

The rest of the drive along a winding, hedge-bordered lane, with grass and arable fields on either side, here and there a farmhouse with a group of cottages, and to the left a slow stream meandering through water meadows, was taken up with subjects having to do with Wrotham's ownership of the estate, and Browne's management of it, also with questions of sport. When they approached the broad sheet of water, on the other side of which the house and the village faced them, Wrotham gave vent to an involuntary expression of surprise and pleasure. "By Jove!" he said. "I didn't remember it was half as jolly as this."

Browne's round, red face showed gratification. "Ah! I thought you'd be pleased," he said. "To tell you the truth, I did hope you would have settled down here yourself. It wouldn't cost half as much to keep up as Hurstbury, and there's more fun to be got out of it. However, it's too late to think about that now. You'll be down here occasionally, I dare say?"

"Oh, I expect I shall spend most of my time here," replied the young man flippantly. "Can't bear to be parted from my mother, you know."

"I say, Kemsing, you'll have to be careful how you speak about Lady Wrotham down here," said Browne seriously. "I haven't breathed a word about the difficulties that may crop up—jolly careful not to. Don't let anybody hear you say anything—er—disrespectful. It 'ud create a devilish bad impression."

The young man laughed. "It's an impression that has been created in a good many places," he said. "Her ladyship and I don't get on, as they say. She's never hidden the fact, and why should I? However, I don't suppose our disturbances will have much effect on your collection of inno-

cents, for this will probably be my last visit to Exton for some considerable time. Ah, this is the Gate House. I remember this."

Then followed the inspection of house and gardens. Browne suggested that the adjacent ruins of the old Abbey should also receive notice. Lord Wrotham demurred.

"Let's leave them for the present, and get through the papers," he said, and they adjourned for an hour to the estate office.

The news had meantime got about that the new Earl was on view for a strictly limited period, and, when he and Browne emerged from the office and climbed again into the dog-cart, there was a fair proportion of the inhabitants of Exton gathered together on the pavements, or in the village street, for the purpose of viewing the portent. What malign fate was it that brought the Vicar's wife down the road with a warm invitation to luncheon just one minute too late? She had received the news only half-an-hour before, had spent the intervening time in strenuous efforts to raise the tone of her establishment to the necessary altitude, and, changing her attire, had borne down on the Manor office to deliver the invitation herself, her husband being out for the day. Now she had the mortification of seeing Browne's dog-cart swing down the road and round the corner of the inn while she was yet a hundred yards away from the point at which it had been standing for the past hour. Should she call out? Instinctively, in her distress, she opened her mouth to do so. But her voice would not carry so far. Should she shout to the bystanders to stop the cart? The force of lusty male lungs would have the effect that she could not produce by herself. "Stop them, stop them," she cried shrilly. A few heads of the score or so turned towards the disappearing cart, faced round slowly, and remained fixed, their eyes regarding her with bovine blankness. Mrs. Prentice anathematized the stupidity of their owners in language which,

in a calmer moment, she would have been the first to deprecate —especially in Lent. But, fortunately, she used it inaudibly, and congratulated herself later that her influence for good over her husband's flock had not suffered serious damage from her moment of pardonable irritation. When she succeeded in making it understood what it was she wanted, the cart had disappeared.

But Mrs. Prentice was not yet beaten. She seized upon the recipient of her last discarded hat—a young girl of eighteen, whom she had thought it was most likely to suit—and sent her speeding off with a message. Gratitude, combined with hope, lent the damsel wings. She ran off in the track of the departing wheels, conning her lesson as she went. She was not to forget to say this, she was to be sure and remember to say that. She clung to the two words, "compliments" and "honour," upon which her instructions were peremptory. Mrs. Prentice's compliments, and would his lordship do her the honour? Compliments first. "C" comes before "h." And she was to be sure and say "my lord," as was only fitting. By the time she had tracked the pair to the home-farm she had her lesson, and delivered it jerkily with what breath remained to her. But she delivered it to Browne, not being able, when the time came, to support the effulgence of the titled stranger. "Mrs. Prentice's compliments, and will she do you the honour of my lord's lunch at one o'clock?" Browne disentangled the kernel of the message from the husk.

"Thank Mrs. Prentice, and say that his lordship is lunching with me," he said, and the damsel departed.

"Who is Mrs. Prentice?" asked Wrotham.

"Oh, the Vicar's wife. You don't want to be bothered with her." And they turned afresh to their inspection of various live-stock.

The White House, with its sweep of lawn, flanked by big trees, and backed by a grassy rise, faced them as they came

out again into the road. Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda were at work on one of the flower beds. The trees and shrubs which had been planted as a screen from the road had not yet grown up, and the whole garden lay open to view from the seat of Browne's dog-cart.

"By Jove, that's a pretty place," said Wrotham.

"Yes. It was a carter's cottage," said Browne, with some pride. "We altered it ourselves. Made a good job of it, haven't we?" He waved his hat to the ladies, who had turned towards them at the sound of wheels. They were too far off for their faces to be seen, but Hilda stood, a young, erect figure, regarding them with a frank curiosity. "Mrs. Redcliffe and her daughter," said Browne in a low voice.

"Nice-looking girl," said Wrotham, whose gaze had also been direct. "I should rather like to have a look at that place. Couldn't we pay them a friendly call?"

"We'll go in on our way down, after lunch, if you like. I should like you to see what we've done to the place. I believe if we were to put up a few more houses of that sort, on different parts of the estate, we should let them without any difficulty. I'd like to talk it over with you."

They talked that and other matters over during their drive up the hill to Browne's house, and during the progress of luncheon. Then they inspected Browne's live-stock, and stables, and garden, and afterwards walked down the hill through the woods to the White House, having ordered the cart to follow them by road.

Mrs. Redcliffe received her new landlord with her customary placidity. The young man chatted to her and Hilda with impartial good-humour. He had that agreeable gift of never being at a loss for something to say, and could put the most diffident at their ease without exertion. His little jokes and pleasantries, although not exactly scintillating with wit, were so evidently the expression of a kindly, light-hearted nature,

that it was impossible not to enjoy them as heartily as did their inventor. He also had the gift of making himself completely at home, in whatever company he might find himself. His visit to the White House lasted about ten minutes, but by the time he and Browne set off again on their drive to the outlying parts of the Manor, he had been conducted all over the house, and admired everything in it. And he had managed during that short period to laugh and chat himself into the good graces of the younger of his two hostesses to such an extent that she became quite enthusiastic about him, as she and her mother stood by the door and watched them down the drive and out of the gate.

"He really is a delightful person, isn't he, mother?" she said.

"He has very pleasant manners," replied Mrs. Redcliffe.

"I have never met an earl at close quarters before. I am quite sure now that earls must be the most attractive body of people in the kingdom. My admiration for the House of Lords, which I never thought much of before, has increased enormously. If Lady Wrotham is half as nice as her son, I am sure we shall all like her immensely."

"I am afraid she will hardly become so immediately friendly."

"At any rate, I shall not stand so much in awe of her now. Mother dear, don't you think we might go and have tea with Mrs. Prentice this afternoon? I don't think Lord Wrotham will have time to call on her, and I am sure she would like to hear what we think of him."

Mrs. Redcliffe laughed. "I am afraid she will be very displeased with us," she said. "I think we will leave her to find out for herself the honour that has been done to us."

Mrs. Prentice found it out very shortly, and she was displeased; seriously displeased. "It is my belief," she said to her husband, "that Hilda made eyes at him from the garden.

She and Mrs. Redcliffe, who might have known better, had planted themselves where they could be seen from the road, when he and Mr. Browne drove up. Martha Jellicot saw them. Otherwise, why should he have gone out of his way to call at the White House, for which there was *absolutely* no reason, when he was too pressed for time to pay *me* the ordinary courtesy of a short visit? It is as I told you, William. There is a direct conspiracy on foot to treat you and your holy office with contempt—through me; and the Redcliffes and Mr. Browne are in it. I shall not lower my dignity by making a complaint, but when Lady Wrotham settles down here, I shall take very good care to warn her of what is going on."

"I have no doubt you will make a good deal of mischief when Lady Wrotham settles down here," retorted the Vicar in a resigned tone. He had had a tiring day, and was not feeling equal to an active disputation. "It will be very disagreeable, and may do an infinity of harm to my work in the parish. But I suppose I must put up with it. I ought to have learnt to do so by this time."

Mrs. Prentice was too full of a sense of outraged dignity even to give ear to this speech.

"As for Mr. Browne," she said, "I shall tell him what I think of him."

CHAPTER V

FRED PRENTICE

On the day following Lord Wrotham's visit, Mrs. Prentice drove into the station to meet her son, who was to bestow the light of his presence on the paternal vicarage for the Easter holidays, and for as long afterwards as he could be induced to do so. Mrs. Prentice was accustomed in her excursions abroad to seat herself on the front seat of her wagonette, and to beguile the tediousness of a drive behind the incompetent vicarage horse by a conversation with the vicarage factotum, in which she endeavoured to instil into that somewhat slow-witted functionary a just view of the claims of the Church of England on the adherence of all and sundry. For Tom Pillie, as his name was, had been rescued from a family of Methodists in a neighbouring village, and still had unaccountable leanings towards the faith in which he had been brought up. He had been caught young, in the boot-and-knife boy stage, and had consented to undergo the rite of confirmation during a temporary stupor induced by the profusion of arguments brought to bear on him by Mrs. Prentice; but on awakening from his trance he had shown signs of backsliding. Mrs. Prentice still had to work hard to preserve the effect of her original success, and to extend it, but she felt that, if she could once induce Tom Pillie to undertake not to accompany his family to chapel when he paid them his fortnightly Sunday visit, she would have accomplished a glorious work, and repaid herself for the suppressed irritation which she had to choke down whenever her convincing statements were met by the obstinate stupidity of her convert. "Whoever shall leave father and mother," Mrs. Prentice had quoted, with the rest of

the passage, and it is no wonder that she had hardly been able to conceal her impatience when Tom Pillie had countered with, "It du say, 'Honour thy father and mother,' and they be good Christian people, a sight better than most." It was only the happily remembered injunction to suffer fools gladly that kept Mrs. Prentice from venting her sense of his obstinate blindness to the truth, in a manner that might have lost her this wayward lamb, so carefully folded.

On this occasion, however, Mrs. Prentice sat in the back part of the wagonette, and, leaving Tom Pillie to the enjoyment of his own reflections, sat immersed in her own. That these were not altogether pleasant might have been gathered from her face, which was usually expressive of her inmost thoughts. She had suffered what she considered a gross slight on the previous day, and it was not to be expected that she should forget it in a hurry. But there was a genuine pleasure ahead of her, which tempered the bitterness of her thoughts, for Mrs. Prentice was devoted to her only child, and she was about to enjoy the gratification of his society for the first time for some months.

When Fred Prentice alighted from the third-class carriage in which he had travelled from Greathampton—he had enjoyed the luxury of a Pullman for the greater part of his journey—and found his mother waiting for him on the platform, it is not surprising that he greeted her warmly, for her face was suffused with affection, and a young man who has certain delinquencies on his conscience, which make him not altogether at ease in the prospect of a parental interview, can hardly help being touched by a reception in which there is no trace of anything but genuine welcome.

Fred Prentice was a good-looking young man, tall and well set up, with dark, slightly waving hair. He had for the most part his mother's correct features, which were vastly improved by the substitution of his father's mouth, and the brown eyes

of some ancestor. The resultant face was agreeable both in contour and expression, but it would have been improved still further if it had possessed more signs of strength of character. It was almost too young a face to show marks of dissipation, unless of an exaggerated nature, but it looked tired, and as if a quiet holiday in the country would be beneficial to its owner.

The young man's luggage, from the extent of which Mrs. Prentice was pleased to conjecture that his stay was not intended to be a short one, was accommodated by the side of Tom Pillie in the fore part of the carriage, and he and his mother took their seats facing one another, where they could talk in subdued tones without being overheard. Mrs. Prentice put her shabbily gloved hand upon one of his, resplendently covered with new washleather. "I am so glad to see you home, Freddy dear," she said. "You won't be leaving us for some time, will you?"

"Afraid I must go on Tuesday, mother," he replied cheerfully. "I promised to go on into Dorsetshire to stay a few days with an old friend. He's asked me so often, and I've never been able to go before."

Mrs. Prentice looked woefully disappointed. "I did hope you would have come home for a good long stay," she said. "We have not seen anything of you since Christmas. And now you are no sooner here than you are off again."

"Paridelle, my friend, only gets home for the recess—he's in Parliament. If I didn't go to him now, I couldn't go at all. And you know I'm tied to town at other times, mother."

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that he was not so much tied but that he could go off visiting at other houses than his father's, but she would not spoil his home-coming by complaints. If he had decided to stay with her for only four days, she would make the best of the time, and so treat him that perhaps in the future he would want to come more often. She reflected humbly that, compared with the many fine houses

that were open to him, Exton vicarage presented few attractions. It was enough for her to have him within hearing and within sight. It was not enough for him. Children were like that when they grew up and went out into the world. Their parents had to fall into line and be judged by their power of affording entertainment, in just the same way as other hosts and hostesses were judged. It would hardly mend matters to put in a claim for gratitude, or any unusual consideration.

"Who is the friend with whom you are going to stay?" she asked.

"George Paridelle. He was at Oxford with me—a year senior. He has done well—made quite a decent income at the bar the year after he was called, and will go right ahead. He got into Parliament at a bye-election."

"Has he got a place in Dorsetshire?"

"His father has—a famous place—Trixworth Court. George will come in for it. Lucky beggar; everything done for him. Plenty of money too."

"But he has done something for himself?"

"Oh, yes. He works like a nigger."

"I do hope, Freddy dear, that you are working hard. It is *so* important for you to do so, you know. Your father and I can't do much for you—not nearly so much as we should like. It all depends upon yourself. I'm sure you have got brains as good as anybody's, if you will use them."

"Don't you worry about me, mother. I shall get called all right. That's all I'm out for at present."

"There is one thing, Freddy dear, that I want to warn you about. I'm afraid your father is seriously annoyed. The tailor's bill, you know."

The young man's face grew dark. "What tailor's bill?" he asked shortly.

"One was sent in to your father, for over eighty pounds."

He gave an exclamation of annoyance. "Now that's really too bad," he said. "I won't have anything more to do with those people. What do they mean by sending in my bills to father?"

"I suppose it is because he paid the last one. You know it *is* heavy, Freddy dear. I own I was surprised—but possibly there is some mistake."

"No, there's no mistake; except that London tailors seem to think they've got a right to rob you. I had to get some clothes."

"Yes, I know. Of course, I like to see you well dressed. But you have had such a lot of clothes during the last few years, and everything was paid up a twelvemonth ago. I should have thought that you could hardly have wanted to spend eighty pounds again in one year—at a tailor's alone. And the charges are so exorbitant—something like sixteen pounds for a dress suit, and I've seen quite good ones advertised for four guineas. Couldn't you change your tailor and go to a cheaper one?"

"Oh, I'm going to change him all right, but it's no use going to cheap tailors. The clothes don't fit, and you don't wear them. It's much dearer in the long run. What did father say when he got the bill?"

"He said he couldn't possibly pay it."

"I don't want him to pay it. But I suppose he'll want to talk about it. It's very annoying that this sort of thing should happen to spoil a visit which I'd been so looking forward to."

"That's what I feel, Freddy dear. It's delightful to see you again, and I don't want the time you are with us spoilt. Just talk it over with your father, and tell him that it will be the last piece of extravagance. Then it will all be over, and we shall enjoy ourselves together. I feel sure that you have really turned over a new leaf, and, as far as I'm concerned, you will

hear nothing more of it. Only I just wanted to warn you that your father is annoyed."

Thus did Mrs. Prentice fulfill her promise to take a serious view of her son's tendency to debt and extravagance. What grounds she had for her assurance that he had turned over a new leaf in these matters it would be difficult to say, but it is quite certain that she could not have improved matters by scolding him, and possibly her instinct towards leniency was justified.

The young man sat silent and rather glum for a minute or two, and then with a mental shake threw off the unpleasant subject from his mind, as it was his wont to throw off all unpleasantness, until it faced him with a peremptory summons to attention.

"Who is down here now?" he asked. "Is your beautiful Mrs. O'Keefe to be seen at last?"

"No, she went to Ireland yesterday to stay with Lord Ballyshannon, and others of her relations. She will be away for a month."

"She is always away when I come down. I suppose the Redcliffes are at home."

Mrs. Prentice pursed her lips. "Yes, Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda are at home," she said. "If I were you, Fred, I should not go to the White House more than I could help."

"Why not, mother? I like Mrs. Redcliffe; and as for Hilda, she and I have been pals ever since they first came here, and she was a kid. What is the matter with them?"

"Hilda was not so very young when they came," replied Mrs. Prentice. "She was sixteen. She is grown up now—rather too grown up, I should say, for I never met a girl of her age with more self-assurance. I know you only like her as an old playmate, but I should not be at all surprised if she had quite other ideas in her head, and that Mrs. Redcliffe shared them."

"I'm such a catch, ain't I? My dear mother, you're talking absolute nonsense. I'm quite sure that Hilda wouldn't have a word to say to me if I were to be foolish enough to—to want her to. What—er—makes you think differently?"

"Never mind; but I do think differently. And, if we are to speak plainly, I should not consider Hilda Redcliffe a suitable—well, *match* for you. The Redcliffes are nobodies, so far as I know."

"Well, mother, you really do say the most extraordinary things. As if the idea of marriage—with Hilda Redcliffe, or anybody else—had entered my head yet! I may be a fool in some ways, but I'm not such a fool as to be thinking of marrying and settling down at twenty-three, with all my way to make."

"I hope not. But whatever you may be thinking of, other people may have different ideas. I think it my duty to give you a word of warning. And on my own account I should be glad if you had as little as possible to do with the Redcliffes while you are here. It is my earnest wish to live in charity with all my neighbours, but it is the most difficult thing to carry out in practice. I sometimes think that people take a delight in stirring up strife and giving occasion for offence."

"I can't imagine Mrs. Redcliffe stirring up strife. What has she been doing?"

"I suppose you have not heard the great Exton news—that Lady Wrotham is coming to live at the Abbey?"

"By Jove, no! That *is* news."

"Young Lord Wrotham was down here yesterday. I don't think he gets on well with his mother, from all I have heard, and I dare say he wanted to have a good look round his property before she came here."

"Did you see him?"

"Not to speak to. Mr. Browne, who is now hand in glove with the Redcliffes ——"

"He always has been, hasn't he?"

"Not, as far as I am aware, in the way of making Mrs. Redcliffe his first confidante in everything that goes on in the place. At any rate, when he brought the news of Lady Wrotham's coming here, what must he do but fly off at once to Mrs. Redcliffe with it, and she, of course, was only too pleased to let me know that she had the information which I had not. And yesterday there was no word whatever said of Lord Wrotham's coming down for the day. What was my surprise to learn at about half-past twelve o'clock from Pringle's man, when he brought the bread, that he was at the office with Mr. Browne! *Of course* I, or your father, ought to have been told, so that we might have shown him some hospitality. I did what I could. I rushed down to the village to ask him to lunch, and was just in time to see him drive away. I sent an invitation up to the home-farm, and received a reply from Mr. Browne that 'his lordship' was lunching with him. Merely that. I don't know when I've felt so annoyed. And I stayed in all the afternoon, thinking that Mr. Browne would at least bring him to call. No such thing. They drove down to the Manor, and he went back by the five o'clock train."

"I don't suppose he would have much time for calling, if he just came down for the day, for a look round."

"He had time, at any rate, to call on the Redcliffes. They took very good care to be in the garden as he drove up the hill, and I have no doubt that Hilda made eyes at him."

"Oh, come now, mother; you know quite well she wouldn't do anything of the sort."

"I *don't* know it, Freddy. I wish I did. At any rate, he was invited in, and I have no doubt made himself very pleasant. I shall be having Mrs. Redcliffe down to crow

over me because he went to see her and did not come to see me. I shall know what to say to her. I think it *most* contemptible to make a dead set in that way at a young man just because he has got a title."

Fred laughed. "Poor old mummy," he said. "I shouldn't worry about it, if I were you. I don't think Wrotham is a very estimable character, from what I've heard. He's always about with his cousin, Laurence Syde, who sponges on him. They've got through a tremendous lot of money between them. It's the common talk that Wrotham will be in a bit of a fix now he has succeeded."

"How can that be, Freddy? He comes in for all his father's property, and Lord Wrotham was a rich man."

"Yes, but he was so severe that Kemsing dared not go to him about his debts, and he raised a heap of money on his expectations, at a ruinous rate of interest. He'll have to pay up now, and he'll be dipped for a long time. Of course, he'll work it off in time, but he'll have to go a bit slower than he has been doing lately."

"I am very sorry to hear that; very sorry indeed. The Wrothams have not troubled Exton much with their presence, but, naturally, one takes an interest in the family, and one hopes to be able to make a friend of Lady Wrotham, now she is coming to live among us. It is well to know all that one can about them. There will be no other woman with whom she can associate on intimate terms here but myself. Mrs. O'Keefe is too young; and although Mrs. Redcliffe may try, I should think Lady Wrotham would be able to see through that sort of thing clearly enough."

"My dear mother, I wish you wouldn't talk in that way of Mrs. Redcliffe. You know quite well she doesn't deserve it, and it is not nice to hear you."

"I shall say no more, Freddy," replied his mother. "But we shall see who is right."

They drove through the village, and up to the vicarage, receiving friendly greeting from those whom they met on the way, for Fred Prentice had lived the greater part of his life at Exton, and had made many friends.

"Jolly glad to get home again," he said, as they turned in at the vicarage gate. "I believe, if I were a country gentleman, I should be quite content to live on my place all the year round. I should like to be surrounded by faces I know. Ah, I wish I could change places with Wrotham."

Mr. Prentice gave his son a welcome, but it was evident that the air would have to be cleared before that amount of goodwill which is requisite for the happiness of three people living together in a house should reign at Exton vicarage.

"I'd better get it over to-night," said Fred to himself, as he went up-stairs to dress for dinner. "Confound those people —and confound myself for an extravagant ass. Still, it's my own money, and I ought to have the handling of it. Then this sort of thing wouldn't happen."

The room, which had been his ever since early childhood, was a large one looking east over the garden and a slope of quiet meadow to the river and the trees beyond. It was shabbily furnished, but contained many of his boyhood's treasures; a full-rigged ship on the chest of drawers, a row of shelves containing school prizes, and a large collection of stories of adventure, his baptismal and confirmation cards, framed and presented by his mother, some once highly prized engravings of dogs, photographs of school and college groups, with faded caps hung as trophies on their frames, a case of stuffed birds, brought down in years gone by by a schoolboy catapult, and stuffed by a village naturalist long since dead, whose knowledge had been greater than his skill, fishing-rods, disused cricket bats, and other implements of sport, and many other odds and ends of little value; but none of them that had not brought with it a thrill of joy when first acquired, and after-

wards many hours of pleasure; none of them that were not eloquent of the happy days of boyhood, when the heart was light, and the cares of life had not begun to wreathe their darkling mists around innocent pleasure. Fred sighed as he looked round on the familiar possessions. He had travelled so far from the days of which they spoke to him, and yet he was removed by so few years from those days. The accessories of his present pursuits, which he kept in his London rooms, had cost a great deal more than these discarded treasures of his boyhood. He gave himself what he wanted in that way, but all of them together had not afforded him the gratification he had received from the poorest of the things in this room. He put together and handled the fishing-rod which old Sir Joseph had given him on his thirteenth birthday, together with permission to fish as much as he liked in certain portions of his river. The old days came back to him, and the freshness of the early morning on which he had first gone out to try his prowess, with what keenness of delight he well remembered. His maturer pleasures afforded him no such blissful thrills. He sighed again as he took the rod to pieces and put it back in its place.

When Mrs. Prentice left the dining-room after dinner, Fred said to his father, "I hear that my tailor has sent in a bill to you, father. I don't know why he should bother you about my affairs. Will you let me have it?"

The Vicar cleared his throat. He had been intending to speak to his son on this subject upon the first opportunity that presented itself, but, lapped in after-dinner peace, had thought he might as well put it off until a later hour of the evening. He had enjoyed Fred's conversation and the breath of the outside world which he had brought with him, and was not feeling quite so severe towards his son as he had done. Still, if it must come now, it must, and he nerved himself to speak his mind. "What shall you do with it when you

have got it?" he asked dryly. "Have you got the money to pay?"

"Well, no—not yet," replied Fred. "Still, one doesn't expect to have to pay a tailor's bill within a twelvemonth, and ——"

"And, if it can be allowed to run on, and, of course, to increase, for another two years you will be able to discharge it with the remnants of your legacy. I suppose that is the idea?"

"I hadn't thought of that in that way. I spend a certain amount a year on clothes, and if I don't pay all of it this year, I shall next, or the year after."

The Vicar thought for a moment. "You're not a fool, Fred," he said, "and you know you're talking nonsense. I've no doubt you argued in just the same way to yourself before, and the result was a pack of bills which it took half of your legacy to pay off. Exactly the same thing will happen again, and you'll start the world with nothing at all to fall back upon. I am not going to scold you about it. You are twenty-three, and quite old enough to discipline yourself without schooling from me. If you won't, I can't help you. But I just want to put clearly before you what it is you are doing. You are having a very good time now, I've no doubt. But what are you going to do when this money is gone, as it will go before the two years are out, if you go on at this rate? You will be called to the bar in a year. But you will be a good deal more fortunate than most young barristers if you make an income out of your profession for some years after that, and you won't make an income out of it at all if you don't give your attention to it, and refuse to allow your pleasures to stand in the way of your work. What are you going to live on in the meantime? You will have two hundred a year as long as I'm spared. If you can't train yourself to live on that now, when are you going to? It will be a great

deal harder in two or three years' time. You are laying up a very hard time for yourself. It is not as if you were preparing for some lucrative occupation. At the best, it will be a struggle for some years."

This calm line of remonstrance was more difficult to meet than the heated condemnation for which Fred had prepared himself. The reasonableness appealed to him, for his brain responded to reason, although his inclinations led him perforce to ignore it. "I suppose I'm not tied down to the bar," he said. "If something else turned up, I should—er—consult you as to whether I hadn't better take it."

"Quite so. I have always had such a possibility in my mind. It is a good thing to be called to the bar, in any case. You might look upon it as the completion of a good and very expensive education. But what you don't seem to realize is that you are practically tying yourself down to that one profession. I'm a priest; but I have kept my eyes open, and I can see clearly enough that opportunities for making money very seldom present themselves to those who have got none at their backs. And on the other hand, a sum such as you would have had at the age of twenty-five, if you had not dissipated it —or half of it—would almost certainly have helped you in that way. I remember reading somewhere that one of the great American millionaires had said that for a business man to make a large fortune was easy enough after he had got together his first thousand dollars, or whatever it was, but that to do that was extraordinarily difficult. Of course, that particular sort of business aptitude isn't found everywhere. I'm quite sure you haven't got it, for instance. But I have very little doubt that your legacy would have been enough to buy you a partnership in some business that you might have been able to take an interest in and increase, or to give you a start in some other way. I believe that what is left would do it, if it is not broken in upon any further. So you see, my boy, that you

are throwing away your chances with both hands, and all for a year or two's gratification, which I feel sure doesn't really satisfy you."

Fred's ambition was fired by the story of the American millionaire. He thought that he had that sort of business aptitude. It was quite true that his present life did not satisfy him, however much he might have enjoyed it if it had not been haunted by the ghosts of the future. In a flash he saw himself living laborious days and nights, steeped in financial operations, piling up gold upon gold, becoming a rich man—a very rich man, with houses and land, horses and motor-cars, wine and books and travel, dispensing a joyous, open-handed hospitality, and all his work behind him. What could it matter giving up a few years to unremitting toil? He was still young. By the time he was thirty, even before, he might have everything his soul enjoyed, and the fulcrum by which he was to gain these delights was the round plum of one thousand pounds which was yet left to him intact. His father was right. What a thrice-begotten fool he would be to throw it away, as he had thrown away the rest. Certainly he would not do so.

He did not consider, being without the experience that would have taught him, that money comes to those who desire it for its own sake, but seldom to those who love to spend it. And he forgot other things. But for the present his father's words had their desired effect. "I have been a fool, father," he said. "I said so a year ago, and, of course, I can't deny that I haven't quite left off being a fool yet. However, I'll pull up now—I will, really—and I hope you won't have occasion to complain of me again."

The Vicar's face expressed gratification. "Very well, then, my boy," he said; "I'll pay this bill—I'm afraid it must be with your money. If we pay it now we shall get a good discount. And you had better send me any others you

have contracted. We'll make another start, and there won't be anything in the way of your rearranging your life according to your actual income when you get back to town. It won't be difficult, if you make a plan and stick to it. Pay ready money for everything, and don't have a single bill outstanding. Now we'd better go in to your mother."

CHAPTER VI

GOOD FRIDAY

THE day after Fred Prentice's home-coming was Good Friday. It was celebrated on this year at Exton by the inauguration of a three hours' service, at which the Vicar, not having been able to secure the assistance of an outside preacher, gave the addresses himself. The subject was broached between Fred and his mother as they strolled round the garden together after breakfast.

"I feel it is a great step forward," said Mrs. Prentice. "The devotional life of Exton badly requires deepening. I have spared no pains in getting a congregation together, and if we can only—er ——"

"Poll the number of votes that have been promised," suggested Fred.

"Pray do not speak profanely, Freddy," replied his mother. "I hope there will be a good gathering. Have you ever been to a three hours' service before?"

"Yes. I went to St. Paul's when I was in London at Easter, two years ago. We had a fine preacher—I don't know who he was, but he was worth listening to. Still, even then, it was too much for me."

"How do you mean—too much for you?"

"Too much of a strain. It is a service that only people, as you say, with the devotional spirit strongly developed, ought to go to. You won't expect me to go to-day, mother?"

"Indeed, Fred, I hope you will. It can do you nothing but good."

"My dear mother, I really can't listen to father for three

hours on end. No one ought to be asked to. Father has no end of common-sense, but when he gets into the pulpit he seems to lose it all. It is church, church, all the time. He never gives you anything to think about."

Mrs. Prentice expressed herself pained by this freedom of speech. "I think your father's sermons are just what are wanted in a country village," she said. "They are simple and direct. The people are told exactly what the Church teaches, and what it demands of them. I don't know what else you can expect him to preach, or what more you want. Besides, preaching is not everything. I should be very sorry if the Church were to imitate the Dissenters in that respect, and place the sermon above worship."

"I don't know anything about the Dissenters, but good preaching is the only thing I go to church for. I do go to church, nearly always, once on Sunday. Lots of people don't now—quite good people—and I should think very few men in my circumstances. But I've got to have a sermon if I do go—and a jolly good sermon too. I think it's nothing less than impudence the way some fellows get up into the pulpit and reel off a lot of worn-out rubbish which they haven't given a moment's thought to. If a writer in a newspaper wants to persuade you about something, he has got to put all he knows into it, or you simply don't read him. And yet here are these parsons, whose business it is to persuade people about the most important thing in life, and they won't take the trouble to get hold of an idea. Of course, they know you've got to listen to them, and I suppose that's why they think anything will do. If you could get up and go out when you are getting a lot of poor stuff, which you've heard a thousand times before, chucked at your head, they might get a lesson, and begin to take some pains."

What Mrs. Prentice would have said in answer to this revolutionary attack must be imagined, for the Vicar stepped

out of the French windows of his study at that moment, equipped for the educational fray. "I'm just off to the school," he said. "It is time you got ready, Agatha."

Mrs. Prentice hurried indoors, and Fred said, "Do you mind if I don't come to the three hours' service, father? I'll come at eleven o'clock."

The Vicar looked rather disappointed, but he said, "Don't come if you don't think it would help you, my boy. But there won't be any lunch here. Your mother and I are just going to have something between the services."

"Oh, I'll get old Browne to give me lunch—or somebody," said Fred, and so it was settled. Mr. and Mrs. Prentice went off to their duties, and he was left to his own thoughts in the sunny quiet of the vicarage garden.

When the morning service was over, Fred and his mother found themselves alongside Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda as they came out of church. There were greetings, cordial between the Redcliffes and Fred, but perfunctory from Mrs. Prentice, who wore an air of prim seclusion until they had cleared the churchyard gates, when she still spoke as little as possible, and in whispers, as one setting an example which she hoped, though hardly expected, would be followed.

Browne joined them, a large pink and red figure in a straw hat and a premature flannel suit, shook hands warmly with Fred, and lauded the weather.

"I'm coming to lunch with you, old man, if you'll have me," Fred said. "Father and mother are going to church."

"Mr. Browne is going to lunch with me," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "You must come too, Fred."

"You are not going to the three hours' service?" was wrested from Mrs. Prentice.

"Hilda is going," replied Mrs. Redcliffe. "I am not very well, and it would be too great a tax upon me."

"It is a tax, of course, in one sense," said Mrs. Prentice. "I am not very well, either, but I would not miss it for anything. I am glad, at any rate, that Hilda is coming."

"I have changed my mind," said Hilda. "I shall stay with you, mother."

Mrs. Prentice closed her lips. She would have liked to glare at the speaker, in response to the obvious challenge in her tone, but refused herself the luxury. With a curt bow, she departed on her homeward way, leaving Fred to walk up the hill with the others.

"Mother is rather tired," he said, half-apologetically. "She has been doing a lot of fasting, and that kind of thing."

"It hasn't improved her temper," muttered Browne, who had fallen behind with Hilda.

"Of course, she is interfering and impertinent," said Hilda, in the same low tone. "But I think Fred is quite right to defend his mother."

"Oh, rather!" said Browne.

"I hope you are going to stay with us for some time, Fred," Mrs. Redcliffe was saying. "We don't see much of you now."

"I'm going to stay till Tuesday," said Fred. "Then I'm going on to a friend."

Mrs. Redcliffe was silent for a moment, then she said, "Your mother has been looking forward very much to having you with her. It is rather a pity that you must pay another visit so soon."

"Yes; I rather wish I had put it off for a bit. Still, I shall be able to come down again soon."

"That will be nice. It is rather a sad time for us mothers, Fred, when our children begin to have more interests apart from us than those we can share."

"Yes; I suppose so. Dear old mother! I'll come down for a week or ten days at Whitsuntide."

"In spite of all temptations. You must remember that you have undertaken to do so. Home ties don't last for ever, but we can replace them with others until we get on in years; then we become dependent. Now that we have got you here, Fred, we must show our appreciation of your visit. Hilda and I have been talking over a picnic at Warren's Hard on Monday. The weather is so warm, and seems so settled, that I think we might risk it. What do you say, you and Mr. Browne, to rowing us down? I hope your father and mother will come. That will make six of us—just a boat-load. We will lunch in the open if it is as warm as this, and ask Saunders for a room if it becomes too cold."

"It will be jolly," said Fred. "Thanks very much, Mrs. Redcliffe. I'll ask father and mother."

"I will write a note, which you can take down this afternoon. I forgot Captain Turner. I must ask him; but there will still be room. Our little circle has become rather small, with poor Sir Joseph gone, and the Lodge still unlet, and Mrs. O'Keefe away."

"I hear that old Lady Wrotham intends to settle down at Exton. Do you know when she is coming?"

"Soon, I believe. Let us ask Mr. Browne."

Browne, appealed to, gave a date ten days or so ahead. "The house is to be cleaned down a bit," he said. "We begin on Monday. But there won't be much to do. By the bye, I've another piece of news for you. I believe I've found a tenant for the Lodge."

"You have told us that so many times," said Hilda. "I'm afraid I shan't believe it till I see the house occupied."

"Well, I own it isn't quite settled yet. But the people are coming to look over it to-morrow. And it seems to be what they want."

"Who are they?" inquired Fred.

"It is a man called Dale. He wrote to me from Wood-

hurst, where he is staying. I don't know anything about him, except that he was a friend of Sir Joseph's son, the one that died."

"Then he would be a middle-aged man?"

"Oh, yes. He said he had a large family. He wants a house with quite a lot of bedrooms."

"I hope some of them will be children," said Hilda. "Both Mrs. O'Keefe and I want some children to play with here."

"I don't suppose he will come," said Fred. "We know our Maximilian's sanguine nature."

"I shall be able to tell you more after I've seen him," said Browne.

They drank their after-luncheon coffee in the garden, in front of the house. It was more like June than April. Hilda, feeling a little bit ashamed of herself, and possibly prompted by her mother, had gone off to church again. Fred had offered to walk across the park with her. They had exchanged very few words, and none but in the presence of Mrs. Redcliffe and Browne. But she did not seem to desire a *tête-à-tête* conversation as much as he, and had refused his escort; and as Browne had suggested that they should walk up to the Fisheries together a little later, and there had been no reason for demurring to the suggestion, he had seen her go off by herself.

The two men took their leave of Mrs. Redcliffe shortly afterwards, and, leaving the garden by an upper gate, walked up the meadow and into the woods which lay behind the house to the north. They walked along green rides for over a mile. The woods on either side of them were bare except for the fresh greenness of an occasional larch or thorn, and the glistening depth of the hollies, but the primroses were growing everywhere, in sheets and drifts and clumps of yellow, and through the purpling network of the trees the April sky showed blue.

After the interchange of some desultory conversation, the pair of them fell silent for a time. Browne was no great talker; had, indeed, few topics of conversation outside the immediate interests of his life, which were concerned chiefly with the property he spent his time in administering. He was a faithful servant, and his heart was in his work. The politics of Exton Manor afforded him abundant food for reflection at this time, and he retired into himself to consider them.

Fred Prentice, too, had something to think about. What had his mother meant by saying that Hilda Redcliffe had—what was it—ideas? He was not puppy enough to think that she had secretly fallen in love with him. So he told himself. They had been good friends—comrades—since her early girlhood, and the last time he had been at home he had begun to feel rather sentimental towards her. He had spent the Christmas holidays at Exton. There had been dances in some of the houses around, and more intimate gatherings at home. He had played golf with her in the park, bicycled, and walked through the forest with her, taken her to meets of the hounds. She had often stood with him while he shot, and he had taken it for granted that she should prefer to stand by him, who was but an indifferent shot, than watch the performances of some more experienced gun. They had been the best of friends, had been thrown very much together, and had enjoyed being together; and even when the vein of sentimentality had begun to show itself in his attitude towards her, she had not withdrawn her frank companionship, but had laughed at him, and, so to speak, kept him in his place.

Then he had gone back to London, and—forgotten her? No; but had had so many other interests that he had not made an opportunity, as he might very well have done, of coming down to Exton and renewing, for a few days, the pleasing intercourse of those delightful Christmas holidays. For they had been delightful. He had had very few cares at that time—

none to speak of, for the weeds of debt, from which the ground of his life had before that been cleared, had not yet begun to grow again, although he had been busy sowing a new crop; there had been more than the customary Christmas gaiety to amuse him, and Hilda's constant companionship had made the intervening time pass very pleasantly. He had often thought over those days of Christmas and the New Year since, although he had taken no trouble to renew them.

Now things had changed. He could put his fingers on no definite point in which he could have expected Hilda's behaviour to him during the last hour to have been different, but he felt that she was not the same, that he would not be likely to see so much of her during the days of this visit as on the last, or, if he did, she would keep him at a greater distance. He had not thought about her much since he had last seen her, but the change disturbed him. He was in train for thinking a good deal about her on account of it. What had caused it? She had certainly rejected the advances he had made to her in the winter, but she had done so in such a way that it was impossible to think of her now resenting, and drawing into her shell to avoid the repetition of them.

And yet she might, perhaps reasonably, feel hurt that he had removed himself so long from her. His attentions had been robbed of whatever value she might have put upon them, since they had so evidently been caused by proximity. So she might have argued to herself, and become annoyed with him for showing so plainly how little he really cared for her. His heart gave a flutter when he arrived at this point. Then she did care for him—a little. It was the one thing that was wanted to make a young man at the heart-fluttering age settle down again to the pursuit. Of course he, too, really did care for her. And he would show it. He had four days before him. Perhaps he could take another. It was not actually necessary that he should spend a whole week with his friend Paridelle.

And it was not to be supposed that he would have much difficulty in getting back to the terms on which he had been with her three months ago. What a dear girl she was! So frank and loyal and kind—so pretty, too! Yes; really pretty when you knew her well, and had seen her in all her moods, and all her charming, youthful guises. Perhaps prettiest in that white ball dress with the little pink roses—the dress she had worn at the New Year's Eve ball which old Sir Joseph had given, and at the little dance at Standon House.

Here his meditations were broken in upon by Browne, who said, "I wonder if Turner can have fixed it up on the way to Greathampton? Hardly have had time, I should think."

"Fixed what up?" asked Fred.

Browne started, and laughed a little nervously. "I beg your pardon," he said. "To tell you the truth, I had forgotten you were here."

"What has Turner been fixing up on the way to Greathampton?" asked Fred again.

"Well, I don't know why I shouldn't tell you. It is pretty common talk. He's making love to Mrs. O'Keefe."

"What, the mysterious widow?"

"I don't know that there is anything mysterious about her. Her husband was a brother of ——"

"Oh, yes, I know. I'm tired of hearing that her husband was a brother of ——. She's mysterious to me. People are always talking of her here, and I've never set eyes on her."

"Well, she's a deuced pretty woman. You'll say so when you see her. I'm always advising Turner to go in and win, but the fellow's got no pluck about it. He's desperately smitten, but he doesn't ask her."

"Would she have him if he did?"

"That I can't tell you. I should think not."

"Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"What, me? No, thank you. I'm well enough off as I am. 'Sides, I'm not such a fool as Turner. I can keep my head. I like talking to a pretty woman, and all that, when I'm with her; but as for going out of my way to get opportunities—why, I wouldn't walk across the road to do it."

"Did Turner go to Greathampton with her?"

"Yes. Silly ass! Fancy a fellow of his age! He was going to take some fish to Troutbridge on Wednesday, and he went on Tuesday, just because he had heard that Mrs. O'Keefe was going up to town then on her way to Ireland, and he wanted to travel as far as Greathampton with her. Perfectly silly, I call it. However, it's none of my business. If he likes to make an ass of himself, he can."

"And that's when you think he may have done it? Well, we'll find out. It would be rather fun to see old Turner married."

They had come out at the bottom of the chain of ponds which stretched up the valley to the breeding-house, and the spring which fed them. Higher up still was Turner's house, rose- and clematis-covered, with a backing of pines, its windows blinking in the sunshine across the flowers in its garden. A narrow strip of ground, where the unconfined stream had once run, had been cleared here between the trees, and tanks, some puddled with clay, others neatly cemented, succeeded one another, and were linked together by narrow sluices, down which the water ran cleanly. A thatch of dried reeds, supported on wire-netting fastened to tree trunks, was laid across the middle of each tank to afford shelter for the fish, which could be seen lurking in its shadow, their blunt, brown heads facing the incoming water, and their tails waving to and fro.

"This is where he keeps his three-year-olds," said Browne, bending down to get the light right for an inspec-

"They're a well-grown lot."

"There he is," said Fred. "Pottering about as usual."

Turner had just come out of one of the little galvanized iron houses which were dotted about by the upper ponds. He descried them coming up the valley, and waved a hand, walking slowly to meet them between his ponds. The arrangement of these upper ponds was a marvel of ingenuity. They had been made close together, and stretched across the wider ground in three or four rows. There was a gentle fall of water two ways, and the stream was led back and across to feed them in such a way that both declivities were made use of, and so that at any time a tank could be emptied, and the water shut out from it, without interfering with the flow. The ground had been planted here with azaleas and berberis and bamboos, and there were beds dug in the fertile peaty soil for hardy flowers, which were already pushing up their herald clumps of green. Utility and ornament went hand in hand, and no fairer spot for a hermitage could have been found than that in which Turner lived solitary, raised his fish, and grew his flowers.

Turner's welcome was expressed by a slight contraction of the muscles of one side of his face. He had on a very old tweed suit, and his hands in his pockets. "So you've come down, have you?" he said to Fred. "How long do you intend to fascinate the ladies in these parts?"

"You old misanthrope," said Fred, with a dig of the knuckles among Turner's lean ribs. "I've been hearing tales about you. Come out of your shell at last, have you?"

"Browne's jealous," returned the other. "Can't bear to see anybody else looking after a lady—a certain lady."

Browne spluttered. "Come, I like that," he said. "What do you always want to be putting it on to me for? Why don't you behave like a man? You'd ha' been married by this time, if you'd had the pluck of a mouse."

Turner threw at him a gadfly look. "Don't give yourself away before young Fred," he whispered loudly.

"Oh, you needn't mind me," said Fred. "So Maximilian is in it too, is he?"

"In it?" echoed Turner. "He's head over ears in it. Have you come up to get a drink, or to borrow a book? Come in."

He turned and led the way to the house.

"We have come for the pleasure of your society," said Fred. "But, now we are here, we'll take both."

Browne said nothing, having no suitable words at command.

They went into the book-lined sitting-room. Browne and Fred sat them down in two of the deep easy-chairs, while Turner manipulated a mysterious table in the window, from whose recesses, as he opened its leaves, sprang complete all the apparatus for refreshment. Fred cast his eye on the walls.

"I suppose these shelves contain more rubbish than you could find in the same space anywhere else," he said.

"Funny what a lot of people come and borrow from them," said Turner.

"Oh, we all like to read a good novel sometimes. You're the only man I know who reads all the bad ones, and keeps 'em by him. Why don't you hire your books from a library?"

"Why don't you hire your clothes from a pawnbroker? Here you are—mild for the youth, strong for the old toper."

They sipped and smoked and chatted. Browne spoke of his expected tenant for the Lodge.

"Friend of Sir Joseph's son?" said Turner. "But he died twenty years ago."

"I don't know. I never heard."

"The old man told me so. And, mind you, old Sir Joseph wasn't much in those days."

"He was very rich. He retired from business when he came here."

"Yes. But he had spent all his life making his money. He came from nothing at all. He had never lived in a big house before he took the Abbey. He told me all about it."

"What are you driving at?"

"I'm thinking that if this man of yours was a friend of Sir Joseph's son in those days, he might not—well, he might not be of the sort that the old lady would want about her when she comes here."

"You must be careful of that, Maximilian," said Fred. "Don't get any outsiders in."

"Oh, I'll be careful," said Browne. "If this man is no worse than old Sir Joseph, there won't be much to complain of."

"Old Sir Joseph was one in a thousand," said Turner. "But his early friends who used to come down here weren't exactly of the highest class. I don't care a hang what a man is for myself, 's long as he's a good fellow; but you know what the women are, Browne. At least, you ought to—regular lady-killer. Don't let your soft heart run away with you when this fellow comes."

Fred suddenly rose. "I must be getting back home," he said.

"Getting back home!" exclaimed Turner. "Why, you've only just come. Sit down and have another drink."

"No, thanks. I must be off. The mater won't know where I am."

"I'm not coming yet," said Browne. "I'm very comfortable where I am." He looked it, as he sat back in his chair, his large frame bolstered about with the cushioned back and sides.

"All right," said Fred. "Good-bye. See you both later on," and he took up his hat and stick, and hurried out of the room.

"Wants to see Hilda Redcliffe home from church," said Browne as he left the room. "Only just thought of it."

"Never saw such a fellow for the petticoats," said Turner. "He won't reach forty like us without being caught, eh?"

Browne, with an unaccustomed perception, had put his finger plumb on the reason for Fred's hurried departure. What was he doing there on a fresh and sunny spring day, smoking, and drinking whisky and soda with two elderly men, indoors, when the world held delights of which to hear them speak was an absurdity? They might tickle each other's sides—the fat sides of Browne, the lean sides of Turner—with talk of their goddess; their sober, mature goddess, who had already given up her claim to Olympus, and must be wooed, if wooed at all, by the light of her drab mortality. A widow, comfortably off! A fitting object of devotion for substantial men, who had left the high, sun-flooded clouds behind them, and descended to earth, to walk henceforth by the yellow gas-flame of expediency. There was no kinship between him and them. Let them smoke and drink and gossip. For him there was the Spring sunshine and the bursting earth, and a girl, walking in the glamour of her untouched youth, inscrutable, inviting.

Fred walked quickly down the road through the wood for a mile or more, then turned into a ride which led him to where the trees gave place to the open grass of the park. He seated himself on a fence, from which he could command a view of the church and the open ground across which Hilda must walk to the White House, unless she went home by the road. He would be able, directly he saw the people coming out of the churchyard, to leave his post of observation, and walk across to where he must meet her, in the most natural way.

He had no time to wait. He had hardly taken his seat when a little black rill of church-goers began to trickle out along the path by the graves, and then swelled into a stream of respectable size, from which, as it flowed out of the churchyard gate, a single figure detached itself and came towards the pond and

the gate which led into the wide expanse of the park. Fred jumped off the rail, and walked quickly towards a point at which he could intercept it.

He felt strangely ill at ease as Hilda looked up and saw him approaching her. It was the first time he had known such a sensation with regard to her; but, then, it was the first time he had ever schemed to meet her, or been doubtful of his reception. He had always hitherto gone to her whenever he wished to, and taken it for granted that she would be pleased to see him. Now he was not so sure, and the little ruse, by which he had almost deceived himself, became disconcertingly patent.

Hilda lifted her eyes, dropped them, walked on a few paces, and then stood still till he joined her.

"So we meet," he said, summoning frankness to hide his diffidence. "I have just come down from the Fisheries, and thought I would wait for you. What an age it seems since we last met, Hilda."

She walked on, and he walked beside her. "Are you coming back to tea?" she asked.

"It is rather early for that. No, I must go home. I will just walk up with you. Do you remember the last time we walked across the park together—the afternoon before I went back to town, when we had had our last game of golf together?"

"I can't say I do," said Hilda shortly, but untruthfully, for she well remembered that wintry sunset under which they had walked slowly up to the little wicket gate which led from the garden of the White House into the park, and had lingered there before they went into the lamplight, while Fred painted the loneliness of his life in town in colours of pathetic exaggeration, and she had softened, and almost, but not quite, relaxed the guard she had hitherto kept up against him. How near she then had been to falling into the mood for indulging

which she had consistently laughed at him, Fred had never known. She was not in the least likely to fall into it now, or ever.

"I think those Christmas holidays were the best time I ever spent," said Fred. "And it was owing to you, Hilda, that I enjoyed them as much as I did."

"Oh, my dear Fred," she said impatiently, "please don't begin that nonsense again. It went a good way towards spoiling whatever pleasure I may have had last Christmas. I'm tired of it."

"It isn't nonsense at all," he replied. "It is perfectly true. I did enjoy those holidays enormously, and it was owing to you that I did so. You can't think how often I have thought over them since, and wished myself back here."

"It didn't go much further than wishing, then," she said, and bit her lip, recognizing instantly that she had made a mistake.

"Then you have missed me?" he said at once, and wiped out her mistake by his own.

"Missed you? Why should I have missed you?" she asked, in heightened tones. "I don't know which I dislike most, the way you annoy me by—by pretending to make love to me, or the way in which you coolly assume that I am in love with you."

They were plain words, but Hilda was accustomed to express her meaning in the plainest words that were to hand.

"Oh, Hilda, I've never assumed such a thing," cried Fred, not altogether sorry that the way had been opened for a discussion of intricacies. But she took the words out of his mouth.

"You have," she said; "and you do. It is not that I care a snap whether you come here or stay away. But you seem to think that you can come back whenever you please, and find me waiting here for you to amuse yourself with, waiting, and grateful for your notice, I suppose."

It was delicate ground, and she was nearly stumbling again, but he was too much affected by her attitude to notice it.

"I thought we were friends, and should always be friends," he said disconsolately.

"So we were friends, but you did your best to spoil our friendship. I'm quite ready to be friends, only I don't want to listen to any more silliness."

This lame, girlish conclusion had brought them to the gate. They stood there as before, but Hilda was evidently in no mind to linger, nor did she intend to renew her invitation to him to come into the house. He had to wind up the discussion in a sentence, if he wanted her to listen to it.

"Well, I won't worry you in that way again, then," he said. "But you'll be the same as you were if I don't, won't you, Hilda?"

"Oh, yes, if you like," she replied indifferently, walking away from him between the rhododendrons.

"Good-bye, then, till to-morrow," he called after her.

"I shall be out all day to-morrow," she replied over her shoulder. "But good-bye."

CHAPTER VII

EASTER SATURDAY AND SUNDAY

Exton Lodge was a house of medium size, standing in its own few acres of garden and orchard and paddock. It stood some way back from the road leading out of the village away from the Abbey, and was approached by a drive curving uphill through trees and shrubs. It commanded much the same view from the back windows as the vicarage, and the lawn, which enclosed it on two sides, was a pleasant place on which to sit and watch the river and the woods beyond it. The Lodge had stood empty for some years, which had been a source of some vexation to Browne, for it was the sort of house which he thought he ought easily to have been able to let, surrounded as it was by all the beauties of forest, field and river, and at no great distance from the sea. He was in and about it early on Saturday morning, causing blinds to be drawn up and windows to be opened, doing what little he could, in its empty state, to show off its attractions to advantage, for he had a strong hope that he was at last about to remove its reproach, and secure a tenant for the only letable and unlet house on the Manor.

At eleven o'clock an open carriage, drawn by two horses, passed through the village from the direction of Woodhurst, and drove in at the gates of the Lodge. In it was seated a stout, middle-aged man, dressed, as far as could be seen of him, in a blue overcoat with a velvet collar, and a high-crowned felt hat. He leaned back in his seat, smoking a cigar, and surveyed his surroundings with an air of contented tolerance, which seemed to show a mind pleased with itself and with the world. By his side sat a stout, middle-aged lady,

in a black mantle with bead trimmings, and shady hat of black straw, modestly decked with black ribbons. Her air was so much the counterpart of her husband's, with a becoming hint of deference added to it, as if she admired the same things more because he admired them than of her own unaided powers of appreciation, that it was plain that here was a couple going through life in the most satisfactory way, smoothly and happily, asking little of fate, because fate had already given them all they could possibly want, including each other. The couple were Mr. and Mrs. William Dale, who had gone through forty years of married life together in a moderate-sized house on the outskirts of Manchester, which they had now made up their minds to exchange for a moderate-sized house in the heart of the country.

Browne presented himself as they alighted at the front door. "Mr. Dale," he said, "I got your note, and have come up to show you round the place."

"Ah, Mr. Browne," said Mr. Dale heartily, with a strong Lancashire accent and intonation, of which no attempt at reproduction shall be made here, or hereafter, "pleased to meet you, Mr. Browne. Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Mrs. Dale. Well, Mr.—er—Browne, this is a charming spot—a charming spot. I think we ought to be able to make ourselves comfortable here. Eh, mother?"

Mrs. Dale acquiesced, with a mental reservation that she should wish to see the kitchens and offices before her acquiescence should take practical shape. There was a short consultation as to whether the coachman should put up his horses, or wait where he was, which resulted in instructions to him to drive to the inn, and return in an hour's time. Then the inspection of the house began. Mr. Dale took charge of the proceedings.

"Now, Mr.—er—Browne," he said, as they went through the hall into the drawing-room, "you'll want to hear all about

us, first of all. Ah, this is a nice room, mother; nice little conservatory and all. And a window opening into the garden. I've retired from business, Mr.—Browne—cotton, you know—give you all the references you want—and the wife and I made up our minds that when we did that we'd retire altogether, and leave the young people to carry on things in their own way, without any interference from us. I've got a son in the business—hope you'll make his acquaintance some day—and a very steady, capable young fellow he is, though I say it as shouldn't; and fond of a bit of sport, too—plays football, and sometimes shoots a rabbit. See, mother? Just a step down, and you're in the garden. We'll have a good look round the garden afterwards. Well, this room's all right, Mr.—er—Browne. Couldn't be better. Now for the dining-room. As I was saying, we want to end our days in the country, as far from Manchester as possible, see? And we've always had a fancy for this part of the world ever since came to stay here with poor young Joe Chapman—well, I say young; but he was forty then—just the same age as me. And now I'm sixty. The years don't stand still, Mr.—er. Here's the dining-room, mother. Just right, eh? There was a time when we sat down fourteen to dinner, Mr. Browne, family and servants; ten up-stairs and four down; but there won't be so many of us here. Well, as I was saying, we came here on a visit to old Sir Joseph, and I said to the wife, 'Mother,' I said, 'this is the place we'll come to when Tom's ready to step into my shoes.' She laughed, you know, because Tom was a little nipper in knickerbockers then, but here we are, all the same, eh, mother? Who was right, eh?"

Browne led the way into the morning-room. His face was perturbed. How could he possibly tell this cheerful, voluble man that he was not at all the sort of tenant he had sought for the Lodge, and that for his own happiness he had much better settle down amongst others of his kind, wherever such people

were wont to congregate, for he would be incongruously out of place in this southern countryside. He postponed consideration of the problem for the present. Perhaps he would not like the house. But he knew that he would like the house. Perhaps his references would not be satisfactory. But he knew that he would not be able to refuse him on the score of unsatisfactory references.

Mr. Dale's loud voice broke in on his ponderings. "Well, here's the breakfast-room, mother. Nice room too, isn't it? French windows, you see, into another bit of garden. As I was saying, Mr.—er, we don't want a large place. Nice rooms, and a nice garden, and a nice neighb'rood—right in the country. We've had enough of streets and houses, haven't we, mother? Not too many people, but just a few for a bit of company. I suppose you've some nice company here, Mr.—er—Browne?"

He pronounced it "coompany," and Browne replied, in a maze of bewilderment, that there were other inhabitants of Exton.

"Ay, that'll be nice for mother and me, and the children. There'll be six of 'em living with us, Mr. Browne. There's Lotty—she was twenty-two last October; but we shan't have Lotty with us long. She's engaged, is Lotty, and we shall be cheering you up with a wedding before we've been here long. Then there's Ada——"

"I'm sure Mr. Browne doesn't want to hear the names of all the children, father," interrupted Mrs. Dale. "If we come to live here, he will meet them all in good time, himself."

"Eh, mother, have it your own way. At any rate, there's six of them, Mr.—er; Peter and Gladys is the youngest—just thirteen, and there's Tom, and Mary, and Ada, and Lotty besides. So now you know. Ay, this'll be father's room, where he'll keep his papers, eh, mother? Very nice. Just what we wanted."

The rest of the house also proved to be just what Mr. Dale wanted. He praised everything, without exception, and, as Mrs. Dale passed the kitchen premises with a certificate of merit, there remained only the stables and the gardens to be inspected. These had also been constructed in just such a way as to satisfy Mr. Dale's requirements, and, when they had made their round and returned to the house, Mr. Dale had reached the position of treating everything as his own.

The longer he talked, the more did Browne feel that he would not do as a tenant. He did not object to him on his own account. Allowing for the limits of his experience of humankind, which had not hitherto included the frankly bourgeois, but quite self-satisfied, wealthy townsman, his feeling was not greatly biassed against him. He rather liked him. But he did not suppose that anybody else in the place would like him, or his troop of rough children; and least of all would Lady Wrotham, the shadow of whose prejudices were beginning to lie heavy on his spirit, put up with such a neighbour in one of the most important houses on the Manor.

The kitchen dresser was the only piece of furniture left in the empty house, and Mr. Dale now took his seat on it, while Mrs. Dale and Browne leant against it, and entered into a discussion of details. Browne nerved himself, against his ordinary practice, to be adamant on the subject of repairs. The estate was not prepared to spend money at the present time in putting the house into order. If a tenant did not care to do this for himself, they would have to leave the house empty. The rent was low—he named a figure considerably in excess of what he had been prepared to ask—and it was low because money would have to be spent on the place before it could be lived in. And the lease must be a long one, not less than twenty-one years.

Mr. Dale met him in the most generous spirit. If he had been accustomed to carry on his ordinary business negotiations

in this spirit, it was surprising that he had become so rich a man as he appeared to be. He had expected that the landlord would do something, at least, towards putting the place into order. It was customary. But, on the other hand, the rent was a good deal lower than he had anticipated—here Browne mentally kicked himself—and he was quite ready to spend what was required in making himself and his family comfortable. As for the long lease, it was just what he wanted. He should not have cared to spend so much money as he was prepared to spend unless he could feel that the place was practically his own—at any rate, for his lifetime.

"If I or the wife live much over eighty, Mr.—er—Browne—well, I dare say you won't turn us out, eh?"

Browne had the consolation of feeling that, as far as the financial aspect of the negotiation was concerned, the estate would have the most satisfactory of tenants.

"I didn't tell you, Mr. Browne," pursued Mr. Dale, "that I've already been in communication with your lawyers, Messrs. Shepherd and Pain—I've done a bit of business with them in days gone by—they were poor young Joe Chapman's lawyers, too, and I was his executor. It was them as referred me to you. I asked them if there was a house to let here. They know all about me; but I'll give you other references too."

He proceeded to do so, and Browne felt that his last hope was cut off.

"Of course," he said, "I shall have to submit your proposal to Lord Wrotham. I can't do anything on my own responsibility."

"Oh, of course," said Mr. Dale. "But that won't take long. I'm prepared to do everything that's wanted on your side, and I'm capable of doing that and a good deal more, as you'll have no difficulty in finding out. I don't think you'll get a better tenant than William Dale, Mr.—er—Browne, though I say it as shouldn't. Well, now, mother and me will

be staying at Woodhurst for another week. If you'll kindly put the preliminaries through as quickly as possible, we'll get the work set in hand before we go north again, and we'll come and settle in as soon as everything is ready for us. See?"

Browne did see. He saw that Mr. Dale meant to come to Exton, and that there was practically nothing he could do to stop him. He resigned himself to the inevitable, and allowed himself to meet *bonhomie* with cordiality. "Well, I hope you'll like the place," he said. "We'll do our best to make you at home here if you come. But you're deciding in rather a hurry, aren't you?"

"That's my way," returned Mr. Dale. "I know what I want, and I've got it here. If there's anything more to talk about, Mr.—er—Browne, you've only got to send me a line, and I'll come over. Or perhaps you'll come over to Woodhurst and take a bit of lunch, or dinner, with us. We shall always be pleased to see you, and I've no doubt we shall know each other very well by and by."

It seemed probable. Browne watched them drive away, summoned a woman, who had been hanging about in the background, to shut up the house, and made his way back to his office, a prey to the liveliest apprehensions.

Hilda Redcliffe spent the whole of that day wandering in the forest. She did this at all times of the year, taking her luncheon, sketching materials and a book with her in a knapsack, and returning at dusk, sometimes happy, sometimes pensive. Fred Prentice had shared these wanderings during those Christmas holidays to which he had alluded with such persistent iteration, but she was apparently determined to give him no chance of doing so on this occasion, for she set out immediately after an early breakfast, and gained the forest aisles by way of the woods at the back of the White House, instead of the more

direct route in the open. She returned only in time to dress for dinner. She was tired out, disinclined for conversation, and asked her mother's permission to go to bed directly after dinner.

Fred had arrived at the White House about half-an-hour after her departure, and learnt from Mrs. Redcliffe where she had gone, whereupon he had immediately set out to find her. But she was in none of the haunts which he knew to be her favourites, and, after walking about for some hours from one place to another, he had returned, thoroughly disgusted, to the vicarage. Filial piety disposed of his afternoon, which was spent on the golf links with his father. He kept his eye on the White House, whenever it was in view, rather than on the ball, and got beaten. He inveigled his father into calling on Mrs. Redcliffe at the close of the game, but Hilda had not returned by the time they left the house, nor did they meet her as they returned home. The evening was a dull one for him, and he retired very early to bed, cursing his fate.

Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda were in church at the early service on Easter Day, but he was with his mother, and had no chance of a word with them. And, after the eleven o'clock service, although they did all meet at the church gate, the Redcliffes had a party of friends with them, people whom Fred did not know, who were staying in the forest, and had driven over to Exton to go to church and spend the rest of the day at the White House. Hilda shook hands with him, and immediately went off between a girl of about her own age and a man rather older, who, to Fred's eye, possessed all the attributes of interloping villainy. Mrs. Redcliffe hung behind to say a few words to Mrs. Prentice about the picnic on the following day, but she did not ask Fred to come and see them on that afternoon; made it, indeed, rather difficult for him to do so if he wished, as her last words were, "Well, then, we shall all meet at the bridge to-morrow at three o'clock."

Nevertheless, he did go up in the afternoon, almost against his own will. He could not support the idea of that most offensive young man filling the place that ought to have been his own, and no doubt using his contemptible arts to gain a footing where he ought not to have dared so much as to plant his eyes.

His visit was not a success. The whole party was sitting at tea on the lawn, and, as he had expected, the young man who had aroused his dislike was seated by Hilda's side, a position which was apparently to his liking. Fred suspected him of being a Cambridge man. He had always considered Cambridge second-rate, but he had had no idea before how offensive were the manners in vogue among the members of that university. Why, the fellow had actually acknowledged his introduction to him by a nod, and then returned to his conversation with Hilda as if nothing further was due to a man whom he ought to have known to be a somebody, if only from the perfection of his attire. There was some confusion of thought here, because Fred did not actually claim to be a somebody, but he was persuaded that he looked the part, and the other ought to have recognized it. As for Hilda, she seemed only to have ears for this Light Blue bounder, and it seemed to him actually indelicate, the way she permitted him to monopolize her. If that was the sort of girl she was, he should certainly have nothing more to do with her.

He turned towards one of the girls to whom he had been introduced, the other being engaged with her mother and Mrs. Redcliffe, and began to make rather patronizing conversation with her. She was not a bad-looking girl, rather better-looking than Hilda, really—at least, he would like Hilda to know that he thought so—but, oh, horrors! what was this?

"You look like a Cambridge man, Mr. Prentice," she was saying. Could words so base come from such pretty lips? "Are you up there?"

"No," replied Fred, with dreadful calm. "I came down from the university a year ago, but I was not at Cambridge."

"Oh, Oxford, I suppose. How horrid for you! It isn't half such a nice place, is it?"

Was it possible that there existed any being on earth who really thought this? If so, what words could be used to bring home the flagrancy of the error?

"My brother came down a year ago, too," she went on, without waiting for a reply. "My sister and I went up for the May week. It was a perfectly heavenly time. We never enjoyed ourselves so much anywhere. You don't have anything like that at Oxford, do you?"

Fred felt that the only possible attitude was one of bitter irony. "Oh, no," he said; "nothing in the least like it."

"I thought not. My brother was captain of his college boat—he was at Jesus, and he was able to give us a splendid time. He has promised to take us up again this year for a few days, and we are trying to persuade Mrs. Redcliffe to bring Hilda to join our party."

Hilda at Cambridge! Oh, the profanation! He had intended some day to show her Oxford. It must not be allowed. He must speak to her very seriously about it. But it did not appear that he would have an opportunity of speaking to her about this or anything else at present, for she was quite taken up with this horrible creature from Jesus College, and was at this moment laughing delightedly at some witless pleasantry with which he was affronting her ears. Fred could endure it no longer. He rose abruptly. "I must be getting back," he said. "I just came up to ask if mother could bring anything for the picnic to-morrow, Mrs. Redcliffe."

Mrs. Redcliffe thanked him for the offer, and refused it, which was, perhaps, fortunate, as Mrs. Prentice had expressed no wish to bring anything but herself to the picnic, and would have been annoyed if she had been asked to do so. He was

not asked to prolong his visit, which had only lasted about ten minutes, and walked across the lawn to the gate, pursued by a ringing peal of laughter from Hilda, whose appreciation of the Jesus man's humour struck him as being in the worst possible taste.

When he had walked a little way down the road, in high dudgeon, he stopped suddenly, with a horrid fear knocking at his heart. Would these friends of the Redcliffes join the party on the following day? Because, if so, he was quite determined that he would not. He walked on again, more slowly. No, it was not likely. Mrs. Redcliffe had named the party, and not included them. He breathed with more relief. He would make sure of getting Hilda to herself at some stage of the proceedings, and he would say many things to her, giving her warning, amongst them, of the mistake she would make if she took off the edge of her future introduction to Oxford by a premature visit to Cambridge—especially in such company. He would not make love to her; she need not be in the least afraid of that. The inclination to do so had, as a matter of fact, entirely left him. But, for the sake of their old intimacy, and out of his wider knowledge of the world, he would take an admonitory line, and put himself in a position to which she could for the future look up. She was behaving badly. He would tell her so, making her understand, at the same time, that he only did so for her good, and not because her behaviour affected him, except as an old friend who wished her well. With this intention he walked home, virtuous, but not hilariously happy, and accompanied his mother to the evening service.

As they came out of church, Mrs. Redcliffe's friends passed them, driving home. They were all laughing, and Fred looked fixedly in another direction.

CHAPTER VIII

A PICNIC AT WARREN'S HARD

EASTER MONDAY was as warm and cloudless as the previous days had been. Mrs. Redcliffe's picnic party assembled at the bridge at the time appointed. There were six of them—for the Vicar had excused himself—a comfortable load for the roomy boat, which had been the property of Sir Joseph Chapman, but at the service of all who cared to ask for it, and, since his death, having been overlooked at the dispersion of his effects, had lain at the little wharf of the mill, tacitly assigned to the use of those who had been in the habit of borrowing it before.

It was not, at first sight, a party that gave great promise of enjoyment. Hilda and Fred, the only two young people in it, were, towards each other, as we have seen them. Mrs. Prentice cherished cause of complaint, not yet brought to a head, both against her hostess and against Browne. And as for Turner, her whole being was in revolt against him. He seldom or never went to church, which she took as a personal slight, and the weapons which she had sometimes brought to bear against him were never used without being turned back, by the man's shameless humour, against herself.

He came up to her at once, as she and Fred stood by the bridge, Browne and the Redcliffes coming down the road towards them, and said, in a manner which she afterwards described as the height of impertinence, "How do you do, Mrs. Prentice? It must be months since we last met."

"How do you do, Captain Turner?" replied Mrs. Prentice coldly, ignoring his proffered hand. "Shall we go round and get into the boat, Fred?"

"Better wait till the others come," answered Fred. "Well, Turner, I hope you're prepared to take your share of the rowing."

"Oh, yes," said Turner. "Mrs. Prentice, I do hope I haven't offended you in any way. I can't help feeling that your manner is not very cordial to me."

Mrs. Prentice faced him. "Cordial!" she echoed. "I shall be cordial to you, Captain Turner, when I see you fulfilling your duties as a Churchman and a Christian. The greatest festival of the Christian year has come and gone, and you have held aloof from all the duties and privileges connected with it. Cordial, no."

"It has not quite gone yet, has it?" inquired Turner meekly. "We are still celebrating the octave, you know, Mrs. Prentice."

"*We* are celebrating is hardly the way to put it," said Mrs. Prentice. "I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Captain Turner, not coming near a church either on Good Friday or Easter Day."

"I say, mother!" Fred interpolated.

"I shall speak my mind, Fred," she replied. "When I see sin—shameless sin, and vice confronting me, I shall rebuke them fearlessly."

"Well, then, shut up, Turner," said Fred. "The mater is quite right. You're a shameless old heathen, and a disgrace to the place."

"I know I am a sinner," said Turner; "a miserable sinner. You must try and make me a better man, Fred. If you came here more often, and talked to me, I might improve."

The arrival of the rest of the party put a stop to a further charge of amenities, but Mrs. Prentice was greatly ruffled, and showed it in the way she received Mrs. Redcliffe's greeting, and the more watchful handshakes of Hilda and Browne.

"Why did mother ask that woman?" Hilda inquired of Browne, as they all turned into the garden of the Mill House on their way to where the boat was lying. "She is going to make herself thoroughly disagreeable and spoil everything. She is getting on my nerves."

"Oh, don't talk like that," pleaded Browne. "Let's keep the peace, whatever we do. We must all hang together."

Hilda laughed at him. "It strikes me," she said, "that that friendliness which you are so proud of in Exton isn't so very apparent when we all meet. I think we are really rather an ill-assorted lot of people."

"I don't think so," said honest Browne. "You've only got to make a few allowances."

The baskets had already been brought down and stowed away in the boat. The voyagers disposed themselves, Browne rowing stroke, Fred bow, and Hilda steering. The two ladies were on either side of her, and Turner in the prow of the boat.

They rowed out on to the broad, shining water, which at high tide formed a noble river between its wooded banks, and at low tide was a stretch of brown mud, with a meagre stream running down a narrow channel. The tide was nearly at its height now, and its flow almost imperceptible. They moved steadily down in the shallower water. It would be harder work rowing up again later on.

Fred had his own thoughts to attend to. He could see Hilda above Browne's broad shoulder as he swung forward, sitting intent on her task. Her eye refused to be caught by his. There were not many signs as yet of the friendliness she had undertaken not to withdraw from him, he said to himself, half-bitterly, half-ruefully. And somehow, as he sat silent, rowing regularly, taking a glance at her face at the beginning of each stroke, and mentally digesting what he saw there as he pulled it through, he did not feel quite so sure of being able

to sustain the part he had assigned to himself the day before. He would give that up; he was not in the temper for it. At all costs, he must get back into her friendship. He wanted her. Enforced abstinence from her society, when he had thought that he would be able to enjoy it to the fullest extent, had bred a new tenderness in him. Of a sudden his mind relented towards her. He forgave her coldness, and leapt into a lover-like state of mind, humble and appreciative of her charms. But he must be careful, and gain her sympathy by playing on that string of friendship which was the only one left whole in his lover's lyre.

Mrs. Prentice, her soul rasped to roughness by Turner's veiled impertinence, was in the mood to make herself unpleasant, and essayed to do so, but found her armoury defective against Mrs. Redcliffe's equable courtesy and Browne's preoccupation in his task, which beaded his forehead, and monopolized his attention.

"I hear," she said, "that Lord Wrotham found time to pay you a visit on Thursday, although he was too busy to do me and the Vicar the same honour."

"He came in for five minutes to look at the house," Mrs. Redcliffe replied. "Mr. Browne is very proud of his alterations, although I often tell him that if it were not for the furniture we have put into the cottage it would not be nearly so attractive."

Browne grunted. He had no mental energy to spare for finding or expressing ideas. Mrs. Prentice returned to the attack.

"It does not do to make too much of a visit from a young man like Lord Wrotham," she said. "He has the reputation of being very wild. Freddy hears about him in London. He does not happen to have met him, but they have many mutual friends. One is obliged, of course, to treat the patron of one's living with courtesy, but it would be impossible to approve of all Lord Wrotham's goings on."

Mrs. Redcliffe made no reply, but Hilda said, "I think he is awfully nice. It is a pity that Fred should run him down here, especially if he does not know him."

Mrs. Prentice had an impulse of malevolence. It was as she had expected. These people had inveigled themselves into an intimacy with the young lord, and were even prepared to give themselves airs on the strength of it. But that she would stop.

"Of course, you know Lord Wrotham so intimately, Hilda," she said, "that it must seem very impertinent to you my venturing to discuss him at all."

"Oh, no, we don't know him intimately," returned Hilda. "But he was very nice, and I don't like to hear people run down behind their backs."

Mrs. Redcliffe, anxious to keep the peace, said, "Lord Wrotham did not come to see us; Mr. Browne brought him to see the house. Do not be so hasty, Hilda. Mrs. Prentice was not running Lord Wrotham down."

But Mrs. Prentice could speak for herself. "I shall certainly say what I please about Lord Wrotham, or anybody else," she said heatedly. "And if you like to say that I am annoyed that he was not brought to see me and the Vicar, it is quite true. He ought to have been brought. It was owing to us." And she glanced at the unfortunate Browne, who did not improve matters by saying —

"I'd no idea of taking him to see anybody. There wasn't time. We just went into the White House on our way down, because, as Mrs. Redcliffe says, he wanted to see the alterations. He suggested it himself."

Even Mrs. Prentice could hardly say, "He suggested it because Hilda made eyes at him from the garden," but that is what she thought, and saved the retort to be used on another occasion in an amended form.

The conversation had not carried further than where

Browne was labouring at his oar, but Turner here struck in opportunely from the bows, "Mrs. Redcliffe, I haven't been to a picnic since I was in India. Very good idea of yours. You deserve the thanks of the party."

"Hear, hear," said Fred and Browne, and Mrs. Prentice came in a late third with a bitter-sweet —

"Yes. Don't let us spoil our pleasure by wrangling. There is nothing I hate more."

Warren's Hard, where they presently disembarked, after a row of two or three miles down the river, was a place of considerable interest. A hundred years before its name had been on men's lips. Great three-deckers and smaller ships of the line had been built here and launched from the slips, some of them to gain glory and a name on the deep waters, others to meet an obscurer fate, but all of them to carry on the story of England's greatness in the seas of the world. There were traditions of great festivals, when a monster of the deep, decked with fluttering flags, had slid from the dry land of its strenuous birth into the waters of the estuary, amid the plaudits of a crowd that had gathered from all sides to see the sight. A king of England had turned aside on his way to the delights of his favourite watering-place, and the woods had echoed to a salute of guns fired in his honour from a battleship still in the bonds of her making. Great admirals, their names in history, had walked by the water and heard the din of carpenters' hammers on the stout forest timbers, and perhaps the mightiest of them all had watched for an hour, out of many that went to her building, one of the great ships that was to bear his flag to victory.

Now, all that was left of the place that had seen so much activity in the brave years of a past century was a little sleepy hamlet, two rows of red-brick cottages on either side of a broad, grass-grown street, one of them flanked by the house of the master-builder, solid and unpretentious, but reminis-

cent within and without of the spacious Georgian days. Bathed in sunshine, it sloped down from the agricultural and pastoral land above it to a riverside slip of grass-land, once trodden to bareness by many feet, and lumbered with the accessories of industry. The slips, which had been the centre of all the work which went on in and around it, were shallow declivities, silted up with river mud, or narrow basins to hold a few boats and a river yacht. The remote stillness of woods and fields had closed in on all sides, and thrown a green veil of forgetfulness over the busy memories of the past.

The place was familiar enough to the party which now landed at it. They paid no tribute to its tale of years, beyond praising its beauty, peaceful in the Spring sunshine. They chose a spot on the grass by the river, and set out the contents of the baskets. The men dispersed to collect sticks for the fire, while the ladies spread a cloth, set cups and filled plates. Hilda went across to the old house of the master-builder to borrow a big kettle from its present inhabitant, who carried on some riverside occupation there, and used the large up-stairs room, in which the master-builder had entertained guests at his launchings, for miscellaneous lumber. Fred had been on the lookout for this, and left his stick-gathering to join her.

"I will carry the kettle for you," he said.

She turned no very gracious look on him. "Saunders would have brought it," she said.

"I know," he replied. "But I want to speak to you. Will you come for a stroll with me after we have had tea?"

"We shall be going back almost directly," she said.

"Not for half-an-hour or so. Hilda, do say yes. I am going away to-morrow, and I've hardly had a word with you since I came down. You said you'd be friends, but you have kept carefully out of my way all the time."

"No, I haven't," she said hurriedly.

"Well, at any rate I haven't seen you at all. You must come. You needn't be afraid of my playing the fool."

She did not want to be pleaded with in this earnest style, or to give occasion for pleading. "I'm not in the least afraid," she said, with a little laugh. "Very well, we will have a little walk. I want to hear what you know about Lord Wrotham. Mrs. Prentice says that you disapprove of him."

"I disapprove of Wrotham!" he exclaimed, but at this point the amphibious master of the house appeared with a huge and heavy kettle, and insisted on carrying it to the picnicking ground, also on taking part in whatever conversation should beguile the way, so that nothing more was said between them for the time being.

Mrs. Prentice, under the influence of the sunshine and the tea, relaxed her resentful attitude, and became even friendly, and half-an-hour passed amicably. Then they strolled along the bank, and it was not difficult for Fred to walk on ahead with Hilda, rather faster than the rest, and to continue walking while the rest went back to pack up the baskets.

"Now tell me about Lord Wrotham," Hilda began. "Mr. Browne brought him to see us, and he was so nice and friendly, that it was quite a shock to me to hear that you think him wild, or something of that sort."

"I don't know why mother should repeat things I say in that way," said Fred. "I told her what every one knows who goes about a bit in London—that he has got rid of a tremendous lot of money, racing and so on. I don't want to be quoted as giving him a bad name down here."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of our talking—mother and me. We are very discreet. Besides, we liked Lord Wrotham so much that we shouldn't want to repeat anything against him."

"I'm glad you liked him," said Fred dryly.

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Look here, Hilda, I didn't ask you to come for a walk to talk about Wrotham. I wanted to talk of something about myself."

"I shall be interested to hear it."

"I hope you will. You know I have been beastly extravagant, and all that sort of thing."

"I have heard something of the kind."

"You have heard it from me. I told you a lot last Christmas."

"Yes. And you said you were going to turn over a new leaf last Christmas."

"I did say so. And I haven't. But I'm going to now."

"Well, I'm glad of that. Now shall we go back?"

"No; we won't go back. Hilda, you might say something to encourage a fellow a bit. It's jolly difficult to draw in one's horns and live on a very small income in London, when one has been accustomed to live in quite a different way."

"I dare say it is. It would be difficult anywhere; at least, it would be unpleasant. But, after all, it only seems to be common honesty."

"I hope you don't think I have behaved dishonestly. You must remember that it is my own money that I am spending. If I was expecting somebody else to pay my debts it would be different."

"I am not so sure that it would be different. But, at any rate, it is not my affair."

"I wish you would make it your affair, then. You can't think how it would help me to—to pull up and work hard at something if I thought you cared at all about what I did. We have been friends, and you said we would remain friends. Friends ought to sympathize with each other in their difficulties."

"Well, I am your friend to that extent, Fred. I do care. I should like to think of you working hard in London, and

not getting into any more of the difficulties you told me about."

She turned a frank gaze of friendliness on him, her warm and constant nature triumphing over the pique which she had allowed to sway her. He felt as if the sun had shone out of the cold clouds, and was melted to tenderness. "It is like you to say that," he said, "and it wasn't like you to say my difficulties were no affair of yours. Well, father and I had it out together again. We are going to clear up everything—it doesn't amount to much this time, just over two hundred—and start clear for the second time."

"That is splendid. I hate the very idea of debt. And you are going to work hard now, aren't you? You know you told me how you had been slacking it, as you said."

"Yes," said Fred, rather more dubiously. "But, you know, there isn't really much to work at until I'm called. Just reading in chambers, and preparing for the bar examination. I shall get through that all right. But I was going to tell you, Hilda. I'm going to keep my eyes wide open for an opportunity of getting into something better than the bar—something in which I can use the money I've got. And when I've found it, I'm going to work like a nigger at it."

"H'm!" commented Hilda. "I think it is rather a pity to be going in for one thing, and thinking of another all the time."

"I should never do very much at the bar, you know. But I think I could do very well in some business that suited me. You'll wish me luck, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, Fred; the best of luck in whatever you take up. But, come, we must be going back."

They turned, and Hilda went on, with a didactic kindness which consorted, as Fred thought, most charmingly with the fresh bloom of her youth. "I don't think it matters much what a man works at, as long as he does work, and doesn't

live for pleasure, especially selfish, extravagant pleasure. You know, you are quite content with simple pleasures down here, and then you go back to London and forget about everything but amusing yourself. It is that I was annoyed about—for, of course, I was annoyed; I don't mind saying so now it's all over."

"I shouldn't be content with simple pleasures down here if it wasn't for you, Hilda. I haven't been very content the last few days."

"You weren't to say that sort of thing; but I'll let it pass for once. At any rate, the simple pleasures, with me or without me, didn't count for much when you got back to London again."

"Yes, they did. But I am a fool. Now I'm going to be a fool no longer. And I shall come down here very soon again."

"Come down at Whitsuntide, as you said you would. Test your new resolution by sticking to work for the next six weeks."

"You help and encourage a fellow when you are like that, Hilda. It is something to work for—your approbation."

"You'll have my approbation as long as you behave yourself, Fred. It seems to me I'm talking very much like a schoolmistress. Goodness knows, I've got plenty of faults myself."

"I can't see them. I think you're the best girl in the world, as well as the nicest. I say, I don't think I need go on to Dorsetshire until Wednesday. Will you come for a long walk in the forest to-morrow, and talk to me further for my good?"

"No. Keep your engagement; and if you can knock a day off it, go back to London and set to work. It is quite time you did."

They had now got back to Warren's Hard. The baskets

were already packed, and the rest of the party ready to start. Fred and Turner rowed them back to Exton. Fred felt that he could have pulled twice as far against a still stronger tide. Hilda was splendid, and how kind! She knew how to get the best out of a fellow, and it made you feel worth something when a girl like that took the trouble to advise you, and show that she cared about what you did with your life. He was very much in love with her, far more than he had ever thought it possible that he could be with a girl whom he had known since her childhood, and gone about with as if she were his sister. By Jove, he would show her that he was worthy of her interest, and when he came back to Exton, in six weeks' time—perhaps a little sooner—well, he would see; there was no telling how far his feelings would take him.

CHAPTER IX

LADY WROTHAM

LADY WROTHAM arrived at Exton early on a wet and windy Saturday afternoon, and drove from the station in a closed carriage. The few wayfarers who were passed on the road between the station and the village, and those who braved the downpour to linger in the stretch of road between the village and the Abbey to catch an early glimpse of her ladyship, saw a face, framed in black, peering out through the wet glass, and nothing more, except an elderly maid seated opposite. An autocratic old woman, coming to dominate from a big house the lives of the lesser ones of the earth whose dwellings clustered round it; or, perhaps, a rather sad old woman, coming to live alone in the place where the first happy days of her married life had been spent; she was to these gazers merely an unknown, but interesting, factor in their own lives, and drove in beneath the gateway of the Abbey, watched by curious eyes.

Mrs. Prentice would have liked to line the road from the bridge to the gate house with school children, herself at the head of them, with perhaps a flag or two, and a few words of respectful welcome. Mrs. Prentice had broached the subject to her husband, who had demurred to the suggestion.

"She is a recently-made widow," said the Vicar, "coming here to end her days quietly. It is no time for display and rejoicing."

"Perhaps you are right, William," said Mrs. Prentice. "It will be better for you and me to go to the Abbey in the afternoon—about tea-time. I should not like Lady Wrotham

to come here and feel that there is no one who is pleased to see her."

"I don't know that I am very pleased to see her," replied the Vicar. "She is a member of the Women's Reformation League, and may feel inclined to interfere in my work."

"There is nothing she could object to here," said Mrs. Prentice; "no extreme practices. The Catholic faith is taught, of course, or as much of it as is desirable; but the ritual is moderate, and could offend nobody."

"I don't know so much about that. The Women's Reformation League is offended very easily, and if Lady Wrotham is an active member of it, as I am told is the case, there will probably be trouble. At any rate, I would rather wait until after Sunday before I pay my respects to her. Then she will know the best, or worst, of me—if she comes to church, as I suppose she will—and I shall know where I stand. But you might as well go by yourself."

Mrs. Prentice was quite ready to go by herself, and rang for admittance at the Abbey shortly before five o'clock. She was shown, after a short wait in the hall, into a large room, half library, half morning-room, where Lady Wrotham was seated comfortably in an easy-chair by her tea-table.

"I hope you will excuse my getting up," she said, as her visitor walked across the room. "I have an attack of rheumatism, and I have only just settled myself down here."

Mrs. Prentice said, "Oh, pray do not move," and murmured her condolence for the temporary affliction.

"Thank you," said Lady Wrotham. "It is such a common thing with me that I don't worry about it, but just take it as it comes. Please sit down, Mrs. Prentice. I am very glad to see you. If you had not come so kindly of your own accord, I should have written a note to beg you to do so. I wished to have a conversation with you."

Mrs. Prentice congratulated herself on the promptitude of

her visit, and, during the foregoing speech, took into her mind as much as she was able of the speaker's appearance and manner.

Lady Wrotham sat upright in her low chair. She was short, and, but for her exalted rank, might have been called dumpy. But there was something commanding about her presence, which neither dumpiness nor lack of height could extinguish. She wore a plain black dress, with a cameo brooch at the neck, and a widow's cap; but if there was something old-fashioned about her attire, she wore it with dignity, and it seemed to suit her. Her eye was clear and searching, and her mouth firm. She did not smile as she addressed Mrs. Prentice, apologizing for her disablement, but her manner was courteous.

Mrs. Prentice was all smiles. "I thought I should like to be the first to welcome you to Exton," she said. "My husband would have accompanied me, but, as you know, Lady Wrotham—or, perhaps you do not know, Saturday afternoon is a busy time with a clergyman."

"I know it ought to be," replied Lady Wrotham, "and I am glad that it is so with your husband. A minister cannot prepare too carefully for his preaching of the Word."

Mrs. Prentice did not quite like this, and thought the word "minister" out of place. She was accustomed to use the word "priest," but had compromised on "clergyman," in deference to the views that might be supposed to be held by a member of the Women's Reformation League. "Minister" was quite another affair. But she was anxious, at all costs, to avoid controversy, so she said, "My husband is very conscientious about his preaching. He does not believe, as some do, that it is of no use at all."

"I should hope not," said Lady Wrotham.

"He preaches two sermons every Sunday here—two fresh sermons—and one at the Marsh, and another one on Wednesday evening at Warren's Hard. It takes him a long time to

prepare them, and, of course, he has all his visiting and other parish work to do as well."

"It is too much for one man."

"So I tell him. The Marsh is five miles off, and Warren's Hard over two. But he is so earnest about his work. He will do it."

"Of course the work must be done. But in so large and scattered a parish there ought to be a curate."

"I wish my husband could afford to keep one; but, what with a man and a boy for the stables and garden, which must be kept up to a certain extent ——"

"Well, we must talk about that another time. I should like to ask you a few questions now, Mrs. Prentice, about the place and the people. As the wife of the Vicar, you will no doubt be able to help me to become acquainted with my new surroundings. As I have said, I am very glad you have called, because here I am now, and here I shall stay, God willing, for the rest of my life, and I may as well begin at once to know my way. You will be kind enough, I am sure, to assist me."

How gladly! Mrs. Prentice's heart warmed towards her. "Indeed I will," she said. "You cannot think, Lady Wrotham, what a pleasure it is to me to have you here, to advise and control. Everything has been on my shoulders, so far; everything, that is, that some woman must take the lead in, and I so gladly deliver up my charge into your hands."

"H'm!" grunted Lady Wrotham, with a sharp glance at her. "Sir Joseph Chapman, I suppose, had no lady living here?"

"His sister lived with him until she died, two years ago. But she was an invalid, and not of much account. She was a Swedenborgian, but it did not matter so very much, as she was hardly ever able to leave the house."

"Sir Joseph, I believe, kept up what charities were necessary?"

"Yes; he was *most* generous—never appealed to in vain."

"I must go into that question with the Vicar. I shall, of course, do what is necessary, but I do not believe in pauperizing. I make it a rule to devote the utmost care to my benefactions. I believe far more in personal talk and advice than in money and help, although that I give ungrudgingly when it is required. There are others, I suppose, who visit the poor. You do, I know. Mrs. O'Keefe?"

"Mrs. O'Keefe would do anything that was desired of her, I am sure. But we have no regular system of district visiting. I have not encouraged it, as it is not necessary; not necessary, that is, from the point of view of charity, for there are very few really poor people in the parish, and what there are the Vicar and I have looked after, with Sir Joseph's help."

"But it is a good thing, I think, for ladies in a country village to visit the poor, and to—to see that they are behaving themselves. The clergyman can do much, but I believe strongly in the influence of good women."

"Of course you are so very right, Lady Wrotham. My own labours in that way are sometimes actually exhausting; but, to tell you the truth, there are no other women in the place who—er—well, I don't quite know how to put it—who would be capable of helping them spiritually."

"Oh, indeed! That is rather a grave state of things."

"Pray do not think that I mean to imply anything serious—against anybody. But Mrs. O'Keefe, you see, is so very young—hardly more than a girl."

"She is a widow, and quite old enough to do her duty."

"Oh, yes, and she would, I am sure. She is very kind-hearted, and the people like her. But, as I say—perhaps I have been wrong—I have not encouraged her to go about among them. Still, if you wish it, Lady Wrotham——"

"I think she must be set to work. It will do herself as much good as the poor—perhaps more. But there is Mrs. Redcliffe. She is an older woman, with a grown-up daughter, is she not?"

Mrs. Prentice pursed her thin lips. "I think," she said stiffly, "you would probably find Mrs. Redcliffe more than ready to undertake whatever you require of her, Lady Wrotham."

"H'm! But you mean something more than you say."

"It is the most disagreeable thing in the world to me even to *appear* to be running people down. And as for saying things behind their backs that I wouldn't say to their faces—well, I wouldn't do it. But Mrs. Redcliffe—you must understand that she is, I was going to say, a nobody. And if she has a fault—which her daughter shares—she would be inclined, I am sadly afraid, to pay court to—to ——"

"To a title. I quite understand. Many people do. I am quite used to that little failing, and if it is not too blatant I can put up with it."

"Well, I need say no more upon that score then. It is very distasteful to me to have to say anything at all. But it was really so very marked. When Lord Wrotham came down here for the day, they—Mrs. Redcliffe and her daughter—made what I can only describe as a dead set at him."

"Did they?" said Lady Wrotham grimly.

"Oh, it was most marked. I thought that Lord Wrotham might perhaps like to have some conversation with my husband, and took the liberty of asking him to luncheon. But Mrs. Redcliffe had already got hold of him, if I may use the expression, and by the time he got away from the White House, he had no leisure left to do more than drive round the Manor with Mr. Browne before going back to town."

"Probably Miss Redcliffe is a good-looking girl."

"Well—some people might consider her so, I suppose."

"I think she must be good-looking, or Lord Wrotham would certainly not have put himself out to visit at the house. You need give yourself no anxiety on the score of his actions, Mrs. Prentice. They will certainly not be followed by me."

Mrs. Prentice was pleased to hear this; she felt that she was getting on well. But she was not quite as elated as might have been expected. She had received nothing but kindness from Mrs. Redcliffe, and must have known in her heart of hearts that she did not deserve the things that she had said of her. But the grudges of a spiteful woman are greedy, and clamour to be satisfied. She hastened to discount the charges which her conscience would presently bring against her. "Of course," she said, "Mrs. Redcliffe, with all her faults, is a good woman. She would only be too pleased to go about amongst the poor, if there were any necessity for it. Still, her views on religion are not quite such as might be expected from a good Churchwoman, and I have felt that if she were to interfere to any extent in the parish work, she might only undo the influence that my husband and I strive to create."

"She does well, perhaps," said Lady Wrotham, "to keep quiet, in her particular situation."

"Oh, yes. It would not do to encourage her to take a leading part."

"Do you find that there is any disagreeableness—any scandal—in connection with her story? I suppose every one about here knows of it?"

"Scandal! Story!" exclaimed Mrs. Prentice, pricking up her ears.

"Is it not known, then?"

"I—I—don't quite know to what you refer, Lady Wrotham."

Lady Wrotham was silent for a moment. "Perhaps I have made a mistake in mentioning it," she said, "Like you, I

am very averse to creating mischief. But as I have gone so far, I suppose I must go farther. Only, I beg of you not to make the matter public, if she has really succeeded in keeping it secret, which I confess I should not have thought possible."

"Oh, indeed, you may rely on my discretion," said Mrs. Prentice, hiding as far as possible the state of eager excitement in which she now found herself.

"Well, Mrs. Redcliffe married her sister's husband. Of course, in Australia such a marriage is quite regular. When I was out there with Lord Wrotham I heard of it. Mrs. Redcliffe is not exactly a—a 'nobody,' as you have thought, though no doubt she is wise under the circumstances to draw as little attention as possible to whatever claims of birth she might put forward. Her father was a son of the Dean of Carchester, who was one of the Stuarts of Dornasheen. He emigrated to Australia in his youth, and became a wealthy squatter. Captain Redcliffe, one of the Worcestershire Redcliffes, went out on Lord Chippenham's staff, and married and settled there. His wife died within a year, and then he married her sister, Mrs. Redcliffe, who lives here. He did not live very long after that himself. I did not realize, until after Mrs. Redcliffe had come to live here, who she was; I was not in the way of hearing much about the Exton tenantry, or perhaps I might have —— However, that is Mrs. Redcliffe's history."

Mrs. Prentice was shrewd enough not to betray the acute enjoyment which the recital had caused her. She was anxious now to get away and consider how best she might deal with the information.

"Thank you for telling it to me, Lady Wrotham," she said. "You will have no objection, I suppose, to my disclosing it to my husband."

"N-o. But I do not wish it put about all over the county."

"Oh, indeed, I should not think of doing such a thing. I am so grateful for your confidence, Lady Wrotham. You may rely upon me as a willing helper in all your exertions for the welfare of the place. I hope you will look upon me as your lieutenant. It *is* such a joy to welcome you here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Prentice. I do not intend to live idly. The years that remain to me will be employed to the best of my ability, and I hope they will be employed in Exton. I wish to make friends with the people. Perhaps you will kindly let it be known that I shall be glad if they will call on me in the ordinary way. I must not be supposed to give myself airs over them, you know."

This was said with the hint of a smile. Mrs. Prentice's somewhat confused reply conveyed her appreciation of the pleasantry, together with her opinion that airs from such a quarter could only be looked upon as a gratifying condescension.

"And perhaps you and your husband will give me the pleasure of your company at dinner to-morrow night at a quarter-past eight. The evening service is at half-past six, is it not?"

Mrs. Prentice said that it was, accepted the invitation for herself and her husband, and then took her leave.

Those whom she met on her way from the Abbey to the vicarage received scant notice from her. Her mind was full of the revelation she had received, which even obliterated the memory of the success she conceived herself to have obtained in initiating an intimacy with her patroness. To think of it! A woman of that sort! And she had allowed her to claim an equality with herself, the virtuous wife and mother, who shuddered, yes, actually shuddered at the very idea of looseness in the marriage tie. As she said these words to herself her muscles, obedient to her mind, did produce a quite creditable contraction, and her outraged virtue rose to heights still more sublime. No wonder such a woman gave dinner parties on a Friday, and had shirked the holy fatigue of the three hours'

service! It was surprising that she had the face to go to church at all. By the time Mrs. Prentice reached her own hitherto undefiled home, she had attained a level of indignation from which she threw the name Messalina at Mrs. Redcliffe. She had the vaguest ideas as to the character and pursuits of Messalina, but felt she had produced something epigrammatic in doing so.

She found the Vicar seated in front of his study fire, perusing the *Church Times*. He looked up at her as she entered with a shade of apology. "Just finished all my work," he said. "Well, how did you get on with Lady Wrotham?"

"Oh, very well," replied Mrs. Prentice. "William, I have just heard a thing that has made my blood boil."

"Not a bad thing this cold weather," returned the Vicar pleasantly. "Sit down and tell me about it."

Mrs. Prentice sat down. "It is not a matter to jest about," she said. "If you found you had been nursing a viper to your bosom—a viper sheltering under a reputation for kindness and goodness from the charge of being an indifferent Churchwoman, what should you do?"

"I should send it to the Natural History Museum. It would be a most unusual viper."

Mrs. Prentice rose. "I will tell you what I have discovered when you are in a fit state to receive it," she said. "I come to you with a most serious piece of news, and you make foolish jokes."

"Well, tell me your news, Agatha."

Mrs. Prentice sat down again. "Do you know," she said, "that there is a woman living amongst us, respected by all—except me—who, before she came here, was living in adultery?"

"What woman?"

"Mrs. Redcliffe."

"Oh, come now, Agatha. You know such a thing cannot be true."

"It is true, William. I had it from Lady Wrotham herself. You would not accuse her, I suppose, of lying, whatever you may choose to say of your own wife. She has just told me the whole story."

"What did she tell you? What is the story?"

"First of all, what do you think of this? Mrs. Redcliffe is not the obscure woman she is supposed to be. Everybody knows her own people—I forget their name; and her husband—although he was *not* her husband—was an officer of a distinguished family who went out to Australia with Lord Somebody. Has she ever mentioned these facts?"

"I cannot say she has; but why should she? Women of good birth are not always poking their ancestry down the throats of their neighbours."

"That is a mere quibble. Of course, one would have known these things of anybody who had no reason to hide a tale of shame. However, that is a small point, compared to the great sin of which she is guilty. Captain Redcliffe was married to her sister, who died shortly afterwards. And this woman then formed a connection with him. Think of it! It positively makes me shudder." Here Mrs. Prentice made another call on the muscles of her neck and shoulders, which responded to it as before.

"How do you mean—a connection? What sort of connection?"

"She actually went through a form of marriage with him. Strictly speaking, you might say she had committed bigamy with him."

"Don't talk nonsense. Wait a minute. She was the deceased wife's sister. Well, such a marriage is, unfortunately, valid in the colonies."

"Valid, William! And you, a priest, are willing to shelter yourself behind a wicked civil evasion of the Church's law of that sort!"

"I don't say that I am. I think the law is a most unfortunate one, as I said. And in any case such a marriage is still irregular as far as this country is concerned, and I trust always will be. I deprecate the breaking down of these safeguards against morality as much as you do. At the same time, it is extravagant to talk of Mrs. Redcliffe as having lived in adultery, and all that sort of thing."

"And pray why? Does the Church recognize such a marriage? Answer me that."

"Of course the Church does not recognize it; although I have no doubt that Mrs. Redcliffe was married in a church."

"Pah! Another quibble. The Church does *not* recognize it, whatever some disloyal priests may do in out-of-the-way parts of the world. And anybody who defies the Church by entering upon such a travesty of the marriage tie lives in adultery. Have the courage of your convictions, William, and acknowledge that it is so."

"I do not say that you are not right. But we are no longer a Christian society. We must resist a further invasion of Christian law to the utmost, but we must also exercise charity, and recognize that those whose eyes have not been opened to their full privileges are not guilty in the same sense that we should be if we acted in the same way."

"Oh, I have no patience with that sort of argument. Right is right. Mrs. Redcliffe—I don't know what the woman's *real* name is, though Lady Wrotham did tell me—and would you believe it?—her grandfather was actually a dignitary of the English Church—but I suppose I must go on calling her Mrs. Redcliffe—has been living in sin, and it is only the fact that her—the word sticks in my throat—her husband died prevents her from living in sin now. I shall certainly refuse to have anything more to do with her, and I hardly see how you, as a priest, can do otherwise. I

suppose you will, at any rate, refuse to admit her any longer to the altar."

"Really, Agatha!" exclaimed the Vicar with some heat. "Your attitude seems to me a shocking one. If this poor lady, of whom we have known nothing but good since she has lived amongst us—if she has made a mistake in her life, surely we ought to be sorry for her. You talk as if you were actually elated by your discovery about her."

"I am not elated; I am seriously disturbed. But it does make me angry to think that she, being what she is, has set up her opinion on matters of religion—and on other matters—against me, and I have allowed it. Things will be very different in the future."

The Vicar turned away and sat down at his writing-table. "Your news distresses me," he said. "I must think it over." He turned round in his seat towards her. "But it distresses me still more," he added in a firm tone, "to find you using it as a handle for vindictiveness. I will say deliberately that I think you ought to be ashamed of taking up the attitude you do. It is not Christian, and it is not womanly."

Mrs. Prentice's face showed a dull flush. Her husband's words had been spoken with such directness that they could not fail to make an impression. She burst into tears. "I am sure I try to do what is right," she said. "It is very hard to be spoken to in that way. I am only following out the rule of the Church in thinking a thing that the Church forbids is sinful."

"Then you should take very good care not to fall into a different kind of sin yourself," said the Vicar. "Undoubtedly you have a vindictive spirit. It is constantly showing itself, and you make no effort to subdue it."

"I shall go to my room," said Mrs. Prentice. "You have no business to talk to your wife in that way."

CHAPTER X

A SERVICE AND A DINNER

THE storm of wind and rain that had blown throughout the day of Lady Wrotham's arrival at Exton died down during the night, and Sunday morning dawned bright and clear. Either for this reason, or because of the general anxiety to take an early opportunity of seeing the great lady in the flesh, Exton Abbey church was unusually full at the morning service. Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda walked down the road from the White House shortly before eleven o'clock, accompanied by Browne, who caught them up at their gate.

Browne, for a man of nerves so comfortably encased in flesh, was in a state of marked excitement. He walked faster than was quite convenient to the ladies, and repeatedly mopped his forehead with a large bandana kerchief.

"I do hope she'll be satisfied with Prentice's behaviour," he said. "We're all used to his little goings on, and don't mind 'em. But she takes such an interest in Church matters that she's bound to notice everything, and if she isn't satisfied she'll let it be known."

"I don't think she will find much to object to," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "The service is short, and quite simple."

"It isn't as if we were going to the choral mass," said Hilda.

Browne slowed down, standing almost still in the road, with a look of consternation on his moon-like face. "By Jove!" he exclaimed. "This is the second Sunday in the month. He's hard at work on his choral mass at this very minute. Then we're done."

"The service will be over by eleven o'clock," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "And, after all, Lady Wrotham is bound to know some time that the service is held. It is just as well that she should know at once. And I hardly think that she could object to it. It is only a very bigoted person who would do so."

"It relieves me immensely to hear you say so," said Browne. "I don't know much about these things; but, of course, it's all a good deal more elevated than I've been used to, and I'm rather at sea with it. Still, I'm not at all sure that she isn't a bigoted person, and I shan't be satisfied until they've had it all out. Lor', how I do hope we shall have peace."

"I think it will be better fun if we don't have peace all at once," said Hilda. "Have you seen her yet, Mr. Browne?"

"No; I'm dining there to-night, and so are the Prentices. It'll be a terrible thing if there's a row over the dinner-table."

"There will hardly be that," Mrs. Redcliffe said. "And I think the Vicar has enough tact to get his own way over matters that are of importance to him without giving offence."

"Well, he may have," said Browne. "But what about Mrs. Prentice?"

"It will be a terrible grief to Mrs. Prentice if she has to go against *dear* Lady Wrotham," said Hilda.

"Mrs. Prentice will not go against her honest convictions," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "But we need not to go out of our way to anticipate disagreement. Mr. Browne, will you tell me whether people living in the place—people like ourselves, for instance—will Lady Wrotham expect us to call on her, or will she prefer that we should be introduced to her, and take the initiative herself?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Redcliffe," said Browne. "I suppose you'll call. But I'll find out if you like."

"Yes, do, please. I have not been on visiting terms with

great ladies before, in England, and I should like to do what will please her best."

"Mrs. Prentice will know," said Hilda. "And I am sure she will not be backward in giving us full instructions."

They came to the gate of the churchyard. There was a collection of twenty or thirty people standing on the path between it and the church door, and from within the church came the drone of the organ and voices singing. The Vicar had instituted some time before a choral communion service, held once a month, at an hour which enabled him to dismiss his congregation in time for the church to be refilled by those who still preferred to attend the more usual Morning Prayer at eleven o'clock. These were, perhaps naturally, the majority of his parishioners; but nobody had objected to the innovation, Exton being unusually free from ecclesiastical controversy, except such as was imported by Mrs. Prentice, and there being no obligation on anybody to change the ways to which they had grown accustomed. So, on the few occasions on which the earlier service had encroached on the time sacred to the more conservative, the later churchgoers had waited patiently, as on this occasion, until they were free to enter.

It was five minutes before eleven, and the organ and the voices were still to be heard from within, when the slowly augmenting group of eleven o'clock churchgoers was pleasantly excited by the arrival at the church gate of an open carriage drawn by two horses, with coachman and footman on the box. From this stately equipage alighted a short, but erect, old lady in black, who walked slowly up the churchyard path with every mark of surprise, and some of displeasure, depicted on her face, as she made her way through two lines of onlookers. The churchyard was divided from a gate leading into the garden of the Abbey only by the width of a road, but Lady Wrotham had always been accustomed to drive to church, and had preferred to have her carriage out

and come round the longer way, rather than to walk unattended the few yards that divided her house from the church. She was followed from the carriage by a footman carrying a large Prayer-book, who looked as if he could have wished himself in some less prominent position.

She must have thought that the people through whom she passed were gathered there for the express purpose of watching her arrival, which was an attention she could have dispensed with, for she inquired of Browne in an audible tone why on earth they were all waiting there to stare at her. Browne replied to her inquiry in an anxious whisper. Her expression changed when she took in the purport of his reply. She gave one look at the attendant throng, and another at the wall of the church, then, without another word, continued her progress, and, followed by her Prayer-book and its bearer, disappeared into the porch, and thence into the church itself. It was not until some two minutes later that the music ceased, and a thin trickle of humanity emerged to meet the larger stream that now found its way in through the open door. The great lady's narrow, but determined, back could be seen bolt upright in a pew immediately in front of the chancel rails, and the Vicar, arrayed in eucharistic vestments, followed by his server, walked down the aisle with a flush on his face.

Every one who was alive to the situation felt that battle had been already joined.

Mr. Prentice soon came back to his reading-desk at the tail of his choir, preceded by the post-office telegraph operator bearing a large cross, at which Lady Wrotham gazed with attentive curiosity until Mr. Prentice passed her, clad now in surplice, hood and coloured stole. She remained seated until the service began, when she rose and took part in it with responsible precision.

The service was quiet and short. The psalms were read, and there were two hymns. The Vicar preached for about

ten minutes. His text was, "And again I say, rejoice." He said that it was a mistake to suppose that the Christian religion was a religion of gloom. The Church, in her wisdom, had decreed certain seasons of rejoicing, of which this was one. They had recently gone through the season of penitence, he trusted with benefit to the souls of all of them, and now had come this glad season of rejoicing, just as the day followed the night, and joy came after sorrow. But they must rejoice worthily, and not unworthily. Eating and drinking, and careering about in motor-cars, were not the kind of rejoicing that was enjoined on us, but an increase in the practice of churchgoing was. And what a beautiful thought it was that Eastertide, the Church's special season of rejoicing, came at a time when the earth was awakening from her long winter sleep, when the birds were singing, and the buds opening. But he would not dwell upon this thought, beautiful as it was, that morning. He then touched upon the mutability of human life. He said that we must not think, any of us, that we could escape death. The rich man in his castle and the poor man in his hovel were alike subject to it. Even when we thought ourselves most secure the end might come. The strong man who thought he had many years of life remaining to him in which to build barns and lay field to field might meet his death in the ashes of his burning dwelling, or by a fall from some lofty situation. It was a solemn thought, and one that it behoved them all to lay to heart, he no less than they. With a renewed exhortation to rejoice, not as the beasts that perish, but as Christians, ay, and Church people, he concluded his address, and came down from the pulpit to receive the alms of the faithful, which on this occasion were to be devoted to church expenses.

Lady Wrotham sat in her pew until the church was nearly empty, and when the footman, who was in attendance on the back benches, judged that she would have a clear field, he went

up the aisle, and she gave him her Prayer-book, and walked out.

In the meantime, Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda had waited at the church gate until Mrs. Prentice, lingering as long as she could on the way, had been forced to join them. Mrs. Redcliffe came forward, holding out her hand, and wished her good-morning. "Will you and the Vicar come and have supper with us to-night?" she asked. "We have not seen Mr. Prentice for a long time."

Mrs. Prentice ignored the outstretched hand. "Thank you, we are dining at the Abbey," she said stiffly. "Excuse me, I wish to speak to Lady Wrotham," and she turned her back on them.

Lady Wrotham came down the churchyard path. Mrs. Prentice went back to meet her with the sweetest of smiles. Lady Wrotham's face, sternly set, did not relax. "Good-morning, Mrs. Prentice," she said. "I shall see you and your husband this evening." She went on through the gate, climbed into her carriage and drove away.

"Pleasant manners, upon my word!" said Mrs. Prentice to herself; but presently reflected that Lady Wrotham might be one of those people who prefer not to indulge in mundane conversation immediately after a religious service, and quite forgave her. Her mind had been so exercised over the revelation that had been made to her on the previous evening that she had not had leisure to consider the impression that the service might have made on Lady Wrotham's mind, and was quite free from apprehension on that score.

But apprehension was soon brought to her. Her husband caught her up on the road home. His face was disturbed. "I'm afraid we are going to have trouble," he said.

Mrs. Prentice looked at him. "Mrs. Redcliffe?" she hazarded.

"No, no," he said impatiently. "That trouble exists

chiefly in your imagination. Please do not be always harping on it. I mean Lady Wrotham. Did you not see how she stalked up the church as we were just finishing the Gloria? I could not help turning round to see who was making such a disturbance."

"She walked heavily, certainly; but we were rather late, and perhaps you could hardly expect her to wait outside until we had finished."

"She meant to disturb us, and to show her displeasure. I could see that. She sat there, without kneeling, watching me critically until I left the altar, and looked me up and down as I passed her in a way that was meant to be offensive. She objects to the service, as I might have known a member of that pestilent Reformation League would do. But I shall hold my ground. I will not be bullied by a woman."

Mrs. Prentice had been reconsidering Lady Wrotham's manner to her during this speech, and saw only too good reason to believe that it had been dictated by annoyance at what had gone before. She did not like the situation at all. "I hope you are mistaken," she said. "At any rate, she could find nothing to object to in Matins, nor in your preaching. It was a beautiful little sermon."

"I wrote it straight off. The thoughts seemed to flow easily. But if she has made up her mind to object, she will object to anything."

"We must be careful not to give cause of offence, if she has been used to other forms of worship."

"I don't know what you mean by not giving cause of offence. I shall not change anything that I have worked up to. It is the Catholic Faith that will be the cause of offence to Lady Wrotham."

"I meant it will be better to try and win her by persuasion rather than ——"

"Yes; that will be so easy, won't it? A woman in that

position thinks she has only got to express her preferences, and her priest will obey her as a matter of course. Well, if there is to be unpleasantness, I shall not shrink from it. I have had a comparatively easy time here, with very little opposition. Perhaps things have been too easy. One must not expect to be able to raise the tone of a whole community without a struggle. I am prepared for whatever may come."

With the anticipation of coming persecution to give him an appetite, Mr. Prentice went in to luncheon, and his wife followed him, in a thoughtful mood.

Mrs. Redcliffe, after Mrs. Prentice's refusal of her invitation, left the churchyard gate with heightened colour. They were hardly out of hearing, when Hilda broke forth —

"Mother," she said, "that woman is really intolerable. Surely it is impossible to pretend to keep up a friendship with her any longer."

"She was very rude, certainly," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "But her manners are not of the best at any time, and probably she had no idea that she was behaving rudely."

"The snob! Just because she is the first to make friends with Lady Wrotham! I think she is the most contemptible creature on the face of the earth."

"Hush, Hilda! You must not speak in that way. What is the good of going to church if you allow your resentment to control you the moment you come out?"

"Yes; what is the good of it? Nobody goes to church here more often than Mrs. Prentice. And she looks down upon everybody else as being far below her in goodness. And yet she hasn't got a thought that isn't mean. I detest the woman from the bottom of my heart."

Mrs. Redcliffe did not reply. Her face was thoughtful, and a little paler than usual.

Mr. and Mrs. Prentice walked down to the Abbey that evening considerably exercised in their minds as to the reception

that would await them. The Vicar's face was stern. He had carefully considered his position, and was prepared to fight for what he believed to be the right. His intellect, bound by convention in exposition of his beliefs, served him well, with a clear-headed outlook, in applying them; and they guided him in a way that many a more golden-tongued Churchman might have envied. He would make friends with his patroness if she would let him, and he would exercise the utmost patience in controversy with her; but he would not be dictated to by her, and if she tried to bring pressure to bear on him he would withstand it steadily.

Mrs. Prentice was torn two ways. Her acquaintance with Lady Wrotham had opened so auspiciously that she felt it would be intolerable to be cast out into the darkness of her displeasure at this early stage. But she had so ardently backed up her husband in his ambitions, and even egged him on to further altitudes, that it would be impossible now to take the other side—even if she could have persuaded herself that it was right to do so. Without laying out any definite course at present, she was prepared to keep the peace with strenuous amiability. After all, that was the duty of a Christian and a good Churchwoman.

Apprehension was quieted for the moment by Lady Wrotham's reception of her guests. Evidently there was to be no immediate joining of battle. The great lady was courteous, conciliatory. Mrs. Prentice's fears left her before they went into the dining-room, and even the Vicar, fully alive to the contest that must come sooner or later, allowed his vigilance to relax for the moment under the influence of a generous hospitality.

They dined at a round table in a vaulted hall, hung with tapestry, and lit from old sconces. Lady Wrotham, as Browne said afterwards, did herself uncommonly well, likewise her guests. He busied himself gratefully with his dinner, taking

part in the conversation only when he was specially called upon to do so.

"I like a good dinner," he said afterwards, to his friend Turner, "and I don't mind saying so. We're not badly off in these parts, but Sunday's always been a sort of blank. Old Sir Joseph—well, he was one of the best—but it was cold beef and beetroot with him, same as with the rest of us. Now there'll be something to look forward to when we wake up from our afternoon nap."

The talk over the dinner-table, and afterwards in the library, concerned itself chiefly with the Exton parishioners. Lady Wrotham displayed a lively curiosity about the smallest details in the lives and histories of all of them, and digested the information received in the most eupeptic manner, for she forgot nothing that she was told, even the names of the least important of the tenantry.

"I shall call at all the farms this week," she said, "and afterwards on the tradespeople and the cottagers."

Turner's name was mentioned. Mrs. Prentice shut her lips. Browne took up the tale.

"You ought to see the Fisheries, Lady Wrotham," he said. "It's a pretty place, and very interesting."

"You must ask Captain Turner to come and see me," she said. "Then I hope he will take me up to see what there is to be seen. I should like to know everybody on the Manor, and I hope they will come and call on me."

In the library, after dinner, Mrs. Prentice, alone for a few minutes with her hostess, put in a word of warning about Captain Turner. "He never comes to church," she said, "from one year's end to the other."

Lady Wrotham sounded a bugle echo of the coming struggle. "There may be reasons for that," she said stiffly, and Mrs. Prentice hastened to change the subject.

At ten o'clock a gong was sounded. Lady Wrotham rose

from her chair, and said to the Vicar, "Will you kindly conduct prayers for us? I shall be glad if you will always do so when you are here in the evening," and, without waiting for his consent, she led the way into the hall, where all the indoor servants stood in a line in front of a row of seats placed for the occasion. On a little table were placed open two large and well-worn leather-covered books. Lady Wrotham pointed to the chapter that was to be read, which was a long one out of the Book of Leviticus, dealing with the subject of leprosy. She then took her seat, and the rest of the assembly took theirs. The Vicar read half of the appointed chapter, and then closed the book. Then followed the prayer appointed by the compiler for the 97th evening. It was couched in a tone of didactic familiarity, in the course of which thanks were offered for the fact that, whilst many were without the necessities of life, the petitioners had enough and to spare. The Vicar abbreviated the latter part, and added one of the evening collects on his own responsibility. Then they arose from their knees, and the servants filed out of the room, two footmen removing the oak benches upon which they had rested.

Lady Wrotham remained standing. It was evident that the evening's entertainment had come to an end. The guests took their departure. Lady Wrotham said, as the Vicar bade her good-night, "Will you kindly come and see me to-morrow morning at ten o'clock, Mr. Prentice?" Her tone wiped out the effect of the evening's hospitality.

"I would rather come in the afternoon, if it is convenient to you," he replied.

"It would not be very convenient," she said. "I wish to talk to you upon matters of importance."

"Then I will come at the time you name," said the Vicar.

Browne accompanied them to the gate where their respective roads divided. "Delightful old lady," he said tentatively. "I think we're lucky, eh?"

The Vicar did not reply, but Mrs. Prentice said that Lady Wrotham was a wonderful woman for her age.

"A very restful evening," she said when she was alone with her husband; "and I like finishing up with the old family prayers."

"Well, I don't," replied the Vicar. "At least, not such prayers as those. It seems perfectly absurd to me to read right through the Bible without any consideration of fitness. And as for the prayer itself, those long-winded discourses are not prayers at all. I shall refuse to conduct worship on those lines again. Lady Wrotham has evidently made up her mind to have it out with me to-morrow morning, and I do not intend to leave all the criticizing to her."

"You will be careful not to offend her, William," said Mrs. Prentice.

"I am bound to offend her," replied the Vicar, "and I shall be careful of nothing but to uphold what I believe to be right."

CHAPTER XI

A PRELIMINARY SKIRMISH

THE Vicar called at the Abbey at the time appointed, and found Lady Wrotham quite ready for him. She was brisk and cheerful.

"It is just as well that we should understand each other at an early date, Mr. Prentice," she said, when she had shaken hands with him and motioned him to a seat. "I had no idea that things were in such a way as I find them here—no idea at all—and I cannot pretend that I am pleased at my discovery, or that I shall be at all satisfied until they are altered."

The Vicar sat silent, and she said, after a short pause, "Surely the services you now have here, and your manner of conducting them, have altered greatly since you first came."

"Certainly, I have altered them in some respects," he said.

"But do you think that quite fair, Mr. Prentice? When Lord Wrotham presented you to this living—I remember the facts very well; for though we did not come here, we—at least, I—have always taken a great interest in this and the other churches of which my husband was patron. I remember very well that you were appointed on the recommendation of Sir George Cargill—it was while Lord Wrotham and I were in Australia—and he most decidedly would never have recommended us to appoint any one but an Evangelical."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Lady Wrotham; I never professed at any time to hold the views that are labelled—wrongly, I think—Evangelical."

"Well, I can only say that Sir George wrote to Lord Wrotham that you did."

"Then he did so on his own responsibility; and you would

hardly accuse me, I think, of hiding my opinions; or, worse than that, of misstating them, for the sake of getting a living."

Lady Wrotham was hardly ready at this stage of the argument to say that she did so accuse him, although she had it firmly fixed in her mind that there must have been some sort of deception practiced, or he would not be where he was. She therefore exonerated him, not altogether ungrudgingly.

"I must make that point quite clear, in justice to myself," said the Vicar. "I was senior curate to the present Bishop of Llandudno at Holy Trinity, Manchester Square, and ——"

"But the Bishop of Llandudno is a decided Low Churchman."

"I should hardly have described him so. He is a broad-minded man, and did not demand that all of his large staff should hold the same views as himself. It was a parish where the parochial work was the chief thing. I was there for twenty years, and during that time he had men working with him of all shades of opinion. I never made any concealment of my own views, and I was very happy working there, as I say, for over twenty years. I never held any other curacy."

"But Sir George Cargill ——"

"You mean that I concealed my views from him? I did no such thing. He was churchwarden at Holy Trinity during the whole of my curacy there. Why should you suppose I would have concealed from him what I did not from my own vicar?"

"I do not accuse you, Mr. Prentice. Pray do not put me in such a position."

"But I think it does amount to an accusation—of what I, at any rate, should call dishonesty. Sir George Cargill knew that I worked hard in the parish, and no doubt the vicar told him his opinion of my work. When he suggested this incumbency to me, nothing was said about my views—not one

word—and no stipulation was made that I should preach any particular view. If it had been so, I should certainly not have accepted the living. I would not be so bound."

"Well, I cannot help thinking it was a little unfortunate. Sir George ought not to have taken so much for granted. But, at any rate, I should have thought you would have felt bound—you will excuse my speaking quite plainly, Mr. Prentice—not to go beyond what was practiced at Holy Trinity. You say that the Bishop of Llandudno is not a Low Churchman. I should have thought he was; but I will not argue with you on that point. At any rate the services at Holy Trinity, which I have often attended, were quite innocuous. You would hardly have done there what I saw yesterday."

"I don't deny that I have raised the services here. I consider that results have more than justified my doing so. And I can accept no blame on that score."

"Well, I don't like it, Mr. Prentice, and I tell you so plainly."

"Then I am very sorry, Lady Wrotham; but you will forgive my speaking as plainly as yourself, and saying that I cannot recognize the right of the patron of a living to dictate to his incumbent in these matters. There is no such right in existence. And I must add, if you will forgive me, that you are not even the patron of this living."

This was plain speaking indeed, and a woman of Lady Wrotham's character could hardly be expected to take it without offence. "I did not expect that you would address me in that fashion, Mr. Prentice," she said stiffly. "I asked you to come here to talk over matters quietly, and you tell me in so many words that I am to have no opinions of my own in Exton, and am of no importance in the place in comparison with yourself."

The Vicar had also been prepared, while taking a firm stand, to discuss matters quietly; but he had been taken out

of himself by the implication of bad faith, and was prepared to speak as strongly as might be necessary in his own defence.

"My words could hardly be said to have that meaning," he replied. "They were not meant to have. But it is quite certain that in spiritual matters the patron's responsibility ceases when he has appointed an incumbent."

"I am sorry I cannot agree with you. I look upon the position of a landowner as one of the greatest responsibility, both spiritually and morally. I have no intention of shirking such share in it as I possess in this place. It is a great disappointment to me to find that you are not prepared to work with me in spreading the gospel."

"Oh, Lady Wrotham, how can you say such a thing to one whose life is devoted to that object alone?"

"I consider that the Romanizing of the Church is a distinct hindrance to the spread of the true gospel. I was beyond measure shocked to find the service which I interrupted yesterday going on in any church with which I have to do."

"I think you are saying a very strange thing. The service which I hold once a month at a quarter to ten is the Communion Service, which any Churchman or Churchwoman, whether they call themselves high or low, must recognize as the highest form of worship."

"Not when it is made as much like the Roman Mass as it can be made—with candles, and vestments, and I know not what. Vestments, at any rate, Mr. Prentice, you have no right to use. There I am not to be moved. They must be given up at once. I will not have them."

The Vicar's face grew a dull red, and his eyes glittered dangerously. But he controlled his anger, rising from his seat. "I have nothing further to say, Lady Wrotham," he said. "I think I had better wish you good-morning."

"Oh, please sit down," she said, rather impatiently.

"These things must be talked over. You cannot think that we can both go on living here, in the peculiar positions we occupy, with nothing settled between us."

"I am willing to talk them over," he replied, but without resuming his seat; "but not on the terms you propose. When you tell me you will not have this or that, you are taking up a position which I will not give way to for a moment. No one has a right to give me such orders except my bishop, and he only if the law of the Church is behind him."

"It is the bishop's authority I rely on, and I shall, if necessary, invoke it. The law has decided against vestments."

"I think you are mistaken; but I cannot argue the question with you. I am willing to do so with the bishop."

"Is it the place of a parish clergyman to argue with the bishop?"

"I expressed myself unfortunately. He would hardly give an order such as you anticipate without hearing me."

"Mr. Prentice, I do trust you will listen to reason. This conversation has taken a turn I by no means intended."

"You will forgive me for saying, Lady Wrotham, that you probably intended me to listen subserviently to whatever you chose to say, and immediately obey your orders. I have no wish to be anything but respectful to you, but I hold very high ideals of my office and of my responsibility, and I must press the point that a parish priest is not the paid servant of his—er—patron, and owes him—or her—no sort of obedience."

"I do not ask for obedience. I ask for plain common-sense. The Church of England is Protestant, and it is the duty of all its members, as well as its ministers, to resist any approach to Roman Catholic doctrine or practices."

"You open a wide question. You must know perfectly well that what you say is not acknowledged by many—I would say most—of the most learned and self-sacrificing Churchmen.

I do not acknowledge it for one, and we have no common ground to stand on in that statement."

"What! We must not resist Rome?"

"Certainly we must. But not by giving up what our Church accepts in common with Rome. We are as Catholic as she is. We are *not* Protestant in the same way as the sects are Protestant."

"I say we are."

"Then we must differ in that, as, I fear, in other things."

Lady Wrotham was baffled, as people inclined to hector are apt to be baffled by outspoken opposition. She considered for a moment. "We will leave that point for a time," she said, in a quieter tone. "I should like you to tell me frankly what else goes on here that I should be likely to object to. You may as well, you know, because I shall have no difficulty in finding it out for myself."

"You need not have said that, Lady Wrotham. I have given you no reason to think that I should be ashamed of your finding out anything that goes on here, as you express it."

"I don't know that you have. There is no need to become huffy, Mr. Prentice."

He gave a short laugh. "You saw for yourself what the Morning Service was like," he said. "It would be difficult for the most Protestant to find cause of complaint in that. And the Evening Service is the same."

"There was that great cross."

"Yes, there was the cross, the sign of our redemption. I had forgotten that you might object to that. I wear coloured stoles to mark the different seasons of the Church's year. I celebrate Saints' days."

"Do you include the Virgin Mary in those celebrations?"

"Yes."

"Then that is Catholic, and not Protestant."

"Thank you, Lady Wrotham. Then the English Church is Catholic, and not Protestant, in that respect, at least."

"What do you mean?"

"The Church has appointed a day for celebrating the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

"Oh, the Annunciation! Well, what else?"

"I celebrate the Holy Communion at eight o'clock every Sunday morning, and at ten o'clock on Thursdays."

"Do you ever have it in the evening?"

"No, certainly not."

"But it was held first of all in the evening."

"It has not been so held for nearly two thousand years."

"Ah, the more reason for getting back to it now. Is that all you have to tell me?"

"I see nothing to be gained by telling you of anything more. It is very painful to me to do so, and to hear all that I hold dear, scoffed at. You take an active part in Church controversies, and you know pretty well what men who hold my views do."

"Yes, I do know, Mr. Prentice, and also what they do not do. Do they hold meetings for Bible-reading and prayer? Do they seek to bring about true conversions of soul? Do they preach the doctrine that no priest can come between the soul and its Maker? Do they encourage their flock to keep the sabbath? I very much fear not."

"Lady Wrotham, would you not be happier among the Methodists than in the Church of England?"

If he had asked her whether she would not be happier in a *corps de ballet*, she could hardly have been more startled.

"Mr. Prentice!" she exclaimed.

"It seems to me that you lay stress on all the things that the Nonconformists value most, and ignore the distinctive doctrines of the Church. You would find yourself in perfect agreement with any devout Wesleyan. You will find very few Churchmen who agree with you."

"I beg leave to tell you that there are very many. But it is useless to carry on the discussion further on these lines. I am deeply grieved that it is so. But on one point, Mr. Prentice, I have made up my mind. You must discard your Popish vestments."

"So you said before, Lady Wrotham, and I answered that I do not recognize the authority of your 'must.'"

"Then, deeply as it will pain me, I must report the matter to our good bishop."

"I shall be ready to abide by his decision. Until he gives it I hope you will see the advisability of leaving the matter alone. I think you are entering very lightly on a struggle that *must* create unhappiness, and destroy the peace of a contented, and, on the whole, God-fearing community. It is a great responsibility."

"There would be no necessity for it if you were determined to uphold the Protestant character of the Church of England."

"And so ignore what the Prayer-book teaches. I cannot do that. I hope that you will wait, at any rate, before taking any steps, until you have gone about a little amongst the parishioners, as I understand it is your intention to do, and see if they have not been helped and uplifted by the agencies you so despise."

"I shall certainly make it my business to inquire how far their religious tendencies have been warped. Mr. Prentice, you have caused me real sorrow. I thought I should come down to this quiet place, and spend my days here in preparation for the end which you warned us very properly yesterday is not far from any of us. I hoped that I should be helped and encouraged in that, as well as in trying to do what I could to teach those whom God has put under my charge to live a higher life, by the minister my dear husband instituted to this living to do that very thing. I am an old woman, and

have borne my part in the battle, and I looked for peace. But if I am not to have it, I will gird on my armour again to work for the truth. I have still got the strength for it, and I shall not shrink from my duty."

But for the last sentences, the Vicar would have been affected by this speech. As it was, it gave him the word. "And I shall not shrink from mine, Lady Wrotham," he said. "I want peace, too, but I too have a duty to perform. Let us, at least, recognize that each of us is sincere in our beliefs."

"It is very difficult to believe it of one who is bent on Romanizing the Church."

"I am not doing that; and it ought not to be difficult to believe that those who hold different religious views to our own are sincere. It is a serious thing to doubt it to their faces."

"Well, perhaps it is, Mr. Prentice; I am not so angry with you as I thought I should be—as I ought to be. Mistaken as you are, I believe that you do believe what you preach. At the same time, your views are so entirely misguided and dangerous, that, if persisted in, they cannot but do harm to your own soul, as well as the souls of others."

The Vicar rose again. "I will not prolong the discussion further," he said. "There is one thing I made up my mind to say to you as I came here, Lady Wrotham. If you should ask me again to conduct prayers in your household, I must ask you to excuse me from using the book you put before me last night. It is ——"

"You need not take the trouble to criticize it, Mr. Prentice," interrupted Lady Wrotham. "I shall not ask you to conduct prayers in my household again."

CHAPTER XII

POURPARLERS

Now see of what paramount importance it is, where a difference of opinion divides two downright souls, that they should not remain apart, and suffer the poison of remembered words to work in the blood, unchecked by the mutual conviction of honesty of purpose, which is encouraged amongst controversialists only by propinquity.

There was once a man with a yacht—he was a newspaper proprietor—who invited a mosquito-tongued archdeacon to accompany him on a cruise. As the archdeacon climbed up the ship's side, he saw looking down upon him, the features, petrified with astonishment, of a spectacled, sparse-bearded Baptist, whom he had called Simon Magus in cold print, the Baptist retorting with Antichrist. He was for returning to the shore at once, and the Baptist, after the first horrified glimpse, had already rushed below to repack his hair-brush and his book of press-cuttings, which were all he had had time to take out of his bag. The premature departure of both was prevented by some means or other, and the yacht steamed off to the Mediterranean.

Now each of these men hated each other with a consuming hatred, in the full belief that his opponent was inspired by the devil. But at Gibraltar they went ashore together, and the archdeacon sent a postcard to the Baptist's son, who was five years old that very day, and the Baptist sent a postcard to the archdeacon's daughter, who was exactly a year younger. They still fought nightly over their tobacco, and their host kept the ring, but they fought as men with a common aim, at issue over the means to attain it, and their fury was dissolved in kindness.

The moral is that no man is a mere walking bundle of opinions, mistaken or otherwise. Every man has a soul, and something lovely to inspire it; but how can you find out what that something is if you only know him in print, and make of his soul whatever disagreeable thing fits in most neatly with your argument?

Lady Wrotham, confronted in the flesh with a man who held all the opinions she most abominated, had not been so angry as she thought she would have been in such circumstances. She had seen through to honest convictions, perhaps rather against her own will, and had found something to respect in her opponent. But when she was alone once more, the effect of these unexpected revelations began to wear thin; she forgot them. Mr. Prentice, dressed in priestly vestments, burning candles, muttering incantations, bowing and crossing himself, his longing eye cast Romewards, stood in her mind for the incarnation of her detestations, stripped of all righteousness.

Then her indignation began to work upon the way in which he had flouted her authority. It was disgraceful, unheard of. Her cheekbones flamed. She had fought many such men, and overcome some of them. But here was a man who was setting up a grove, an altar of Baal, so she expressed herself with picturesque metaphor, in those very sacred fields of which she was the responsible ruler. If she could not have peace and her own way here, what was the world coming to?

Oh, religious England, led by the nose to kiss that baleful Roman toe, twitching arrogantly across the water, you must be saved at any cost. Canterbury will hardly hold you back. Canterbury has gone half-way with you, protesting sleepily that your pilgrimage is elsewhither. Geneva, that saved you once, is impotent. From whence is the prophet, the leader, to come? Well, if no Luther, no Calvin, is at hand to turn

you, there are still mothers in Israel, high-born, influential, some of them, "doing themselves well," with tongues in their heads, and pens and treasure at their disposal, who will make it their business to see that you do not make your journey unwarned of its monstrous goal. Feudal, some of them, who will undertake that those dependent on their purses and their pleasure, do not join you, whoever else may do so. And here is one of the feudalists, determined to give no quarter. Away with human weakness! In such a fight as this, husband may find himself opposed to wife, and son to mother. If duty demands that even households shall be broken up in the cause of right, and domestic ties sternly severed, how much more does it behove one set on a pinnacle of responsibility to use all arts to crush a renegade, who rears a hostile banner under the very shadow of the castle? The rebel must not be allowed to creep in under a flag of truce, and paralyze the arm that should strike without mercy. He must be annihilated. He has drawn his sword against the truth, and at the same time defied the authority of his over-lord. It is not necessary to inquire too closely for which fault he is to be most severely punished, since annihilation will account for both together.

Lady Wrotham determined to invoke the fulminations of the Bishop of Archester without delay. It was, perhaps, doubtful if he could be induced to fulminate as heartily as she could wish. She had, in truth, no very great opinion of him. There were bishops whom the Women's Reformation League, boasting cautiously over their tea-cups, reckoned to have in their pockets. This was not one of them. He was an aristocrat himself, and not amenable to Mayfair blandishments; was, indeed, rather impatient of interference from religious, petticoated Mayfair, and had said so with a plainness that could only have been put up with from his late father's son. But, on the other hand, he was one of the cautious prelates who hate extremes, whose names are alike anathematized at

patronal festival luncheons, and greeted with head-shakings in Protestant committee rooms. He might be induced to put his foot down in an extreme case, if there was evidence of general parochial antagonism. In other circumstances, such as a difference of opinion between a great lady and a hard-working incumbent, he would almost certainly chain back his thunders. Lady Wrotham recognized this, with an added sense of injury, and saw that her first step must be to collect evidence of dissatisfaction.

She lost no time. That very afternoon she drove out and paid visits to such of the farm-houses as lay within a two hours' circuit. She went armed with a bundle of literature from the Women's Reformation League, with which she had fortunately provided herself. Her success was less than she had hoped for. She found the Exton farmers' wives more independent than those she had been accustomed to direct spiritually in her former home. She forgave them this, on considering that Exton had for so many years been without adequate social leading, Sir Joseph Chapman, a very good man in his way, having amounted to nothing at all, viewed from the feudal standpoint. And she found very little dissatisfaction. "No, my lady," said old Mrs. Witherspoon, voicing the attitude of most of her sisters, "we've no complaint to make of our good Vicar. He comes to see us regular, and don't worrit us with views. Me and my good man, we don't hold wi' these new-fangled ways; but there, it's live and let live all through the chapter, isn't it? And 's long as he doesn't alter the services we do go to, he's welcome, for us, to hold the others for them as likes 'em."

"But surely," said Lady Wrotham, "you have read in the papers of the rapid spread of false doctrine in the Church of England, and of the danger it is becoming? Surely, it is the duty of all of us, who believe in the old religion, to do all we can to stop this terrible national apostasy."

Mrs. Witherspoon could not see that it was her duty. Her duty was to make good butter, and induce her hens to lay, and not interfere in matters which were the affairs of wiser heads than that of an old-fashioned farmer's wife, or a farmer either, who knew their place, and didn't set up to be gentlefolk like others she could name, who were, after all, no better than she was, although they made a deal more show.

Lady Wrotham, scenting a village rivalry, in which, at any other time, she would willingly have taken a hand in defence of the unpretentious, turned the conversation, having no leisure at present but for her rigorous campaign, and presently took her leave, not too well satisfied either with Mrs. Witherspoon or herself. Did it quite consort with her dignity to be going round to the wives of the tenantry stirring up religious strife? If she had found acute dissatisfaction, no murmur would have been heard from within. She would have taken her proper place as leader of the rising, and would have known very well how to act in the capacity. But it galled her to feel that she might be presenting herself to these shrewd-headed, pleasant-spoken women as a rebellious maker of strife. Somehow, she had not been quite successful in imposing her religious views on Mrs. Witherspoon, and others whom she had visited, as of unquestionable authority. They seemed to hold views of their own, without even a concomitant desire to adapt them, as far as possible, to those she herself expressed. She made one conquest, but it was not one that she greatly valued. Mrs. Capper, a youngish woman with airs, obviously the lady to whom Mrs. Witherspoon had alluded, saw which way the wind blew, and instantly trimmed her sails accordingly.

"I own," she said, "that I have been rather led away by what has been going on, but I can't say that my conscience is quite easy about it. I don't really like it, and never have. But the truth is, that Mrs. Prentice is so very anxious to get everybody to follow her, and it has been difficult to hold out."

"Mrs. Prentice!" echoed Lady Wrotham. "But what has it got to do with Mrs. Prentice?"

Mrs. Capper simpered, with intention. "I think that when you have been in Exton a little longer, my lady," she said, "you will find that it has a good deal to do with Mrs. Prentice. Of course, *I* am not *nearly* good enough for her, and I don't complain about that, as long as she simply lets me alone. I have no wish at all to put myself forward; I couldn't do it; it is not in my nature to."

"No, of course not," interrupted Lady Wrotham. "We all have our places in the world, and it is our duty to keep them."

"Quite so, my lady," replied Mrs. Capper, without conviction. "But if I am not to be recognized as fit to appear in Mrs. Prentice's drawing-room—which, no doubt, I am not—I do consider that I have a right to object to her coming here and laying down the law to me as if she was a bishop at the least. I never have liked it, nor what we have been asked to give way to, and I am very glad indeed that your ladyship does not approve of it either. I hope now that things may be different, as of course they *will* be, now we have got somebody to look up to."

"Well, of course, I intend that there shall be no paltering with Rome," replied Lady Wrotham. "Protestant the Church of England is, and Protestant it shall remain if I have anything to do with it. But, at the same time, you must understand, Mrs. Capper, that I have no wish to underrate, or to encourage any one in the parish to underrate, the authority of the Vicar."

"Oh, no, my lady," said Mrs. Capper. "And I'm sure the Vicar, if he *is* High Church, is beloved by all. Still, you must have things your own way. I quite see that."

"It is not so much *my* way," Lady Wrotham corrected her, "as the way of the law. You must not understand me

to mean more by what I have said to you than that I think possibly Mr. Prentice may have, inadvertently, made a few mistakes, as so many clergymen, unfortunately, do nowadays."

"Oh, yes, and I'm sure he will alter things *directly* he knows your ladyship objects—in spite of Mrs. Prentice. And I'm sure too that all of—of the more educated people in Exton will be only too glad to do *anything* that you think advisable. I know I can speak for myself, and my husband too."

"Well," said Lady Wrotham, rising, "you will perhaps be good enough to read these few papers that I will leave with you. They will show you, more plainly than I can do, what a real danger the Church is running, under the guidance of misled people, of becoming Romanized. We must all of us do what we can, in our different spheres, to stop it, and I see no reason why Exton should not take its part in the struggle that must be carried on from day to day. It can only do so by putting the true religion in place of the false; and I hope to have some meetings at the Abbey, to which all will be invited, which may help us in our work."

"Oh, that will indeed be a blessing, my lady," said Mrs. Capper. "And I'm sure if I can do anything to help, such as handing round hymn-books or providing my share of a tea, as we used to do in the last parish where we lived, I shall only be too pleased."

"Thank you," replied Lady Wrotham. "My servants will hand round the hymn-books, and I shall provide any refreshment that will be necessary myself. But I shall expect you to be present, and your husband too, and when the time comes I hope you will do what you can to make it known that every one in the parish will be welcome. Now I will wish you good-afternoon."

Lady Wrotham was rather disturbed by what she had been

told of Mrs. Prentice, although she was not inclined to put too much credence in Mrs. Capper's vapourings. When she reached home she sent a note to the Vicar's wife summoning her to her presence, and Mrs. Prentice came flying on the wings of a westerly gale, glad enough to have an opportunity of putting matters straight, if by any art of hers she could do so.

There was no yielding in Lady Wrotham's attitude. She dispensed her hospitality with a certain grimness, and responded without excessive amiability to Mrs. Prentice's efforts towards intimate chat.

"You will probably have heard from your husband," she said, coming quickly to the point, "that we did not unfortunately find ourselves in agreement this morning over some most important points. I thought I should like to hear from yourself how far you go with him in his ritual extravagances, so that I may know who are my friends and who are my enemies in the battle that lies before us."

This was direct enough, far more direct than suited Mrs. Prentice, anxious by vague handling of debatable subjects to stave off warfare. "I—er—as far as ritual goes," she said, "I do not consider it of great importance."

"I think it is of very great importance," replied Lady Wrotham severely. "It is by these foolish and unmanly dressings up, and fiddling with Roman playthings, that weak people are led to give up their sturdy Protestantism. If it was not intended to lead in that direction it would not be used. I object to it most strongly for that reason, as well as because I think it contemptible and silly."

"I like a plain service myself," said Mrs. Prentice, already at her wits' end to know how she could preserve the peace without belying her convictions. "I think, perhaps, I prefer it. But ——"

"I am glad to hear that, at any rate," said Lady Wrotham.

"You will be able, I hope, to persuade your husband to mend his ways in that respect. For I tell you, very plainly, Mrs. Prentice, that I am thoroughly shocked with the state of things I find here, and am determined to use every means in my power to stop it. I should like to have you on my side, if you are open to conviction; but if not ——"

The pause was significant. How much, too, would Mrs. Prentice have liked to be on the same side as this formidable great lady; but was it possible? She made another effort.

"It would grieve me dreadfully if you saw fit to withdraw your help from us in the spiritual work of the parish," she said piteously. "I had formed such high hopes of an increase of godliness all round from what you told me of your interest in religious matters. It would be dreadful if the people were to find those in a special position of responsibility towards them disagreeing amongst themselves."

"I think it would," replied Lady Wrotham. "And I sincerely hope that nothing of the sort may be necessary. But, taking the rather prominent position that I have in these questions, even if I did not regard them with the utmost seriousness, as I do, you can see that it is not possible for me to give way in the slightest degree. In any church or parish with which I have to do there must be a direct and unflinching Protestantism. The slightest paltering with Rome is not to be thought of."

"I can speak quite confidently on that point, at any rate," said Mrs. Prentice. "Both my husband and I detest Rome and Roman doctrine as much as anybody."

"I am very glad to hear it, though I cannot say that I see many signs of it as far as he is concerned."

"Oh, but, Lady Wrotham, indeed you are doing him an injustice. He speaks and preaches most strongly against Roman error."

"Every High Churchman does that, until he goes over.

You do not deny that your husband is a pronounced High Churchman, I suppose?"

"Er—no. Of course he is what is *called* a High Churchman, although I do not like the expression."

"Very possibly not. Well, Mrs. Prentice, to tell you the truth, after our conversation of this morning, I have very little hope of being able to influence your husband, and if he forces me to it I shall have no hesitation at all in fighting him openly. But, of course, if you are able to influence him for his good, and *have the desire to do so*, which I sincerely hope you have, the great unpleasantness of a complaint to the bishop, and the consequent scandal in the parish, may be obviated. Now, *is* it your desire to assist me in my endeavour to put things on a more satisfactory basis?"

The nauseous medicine was held to her lips. There was one quiver of disgust and then she took a large gulp. "I will do what I can," she said. "We *must* save a breach."

Lady Wrotham inexorably tendered the dregs of the cup.

"There must be no paltering," she said. "I do not wish for agreement on the surface and disloyalty underneath. There must be active Protestantism."

It was too bitter. "But, Lady Wrotham," protested the unhappy woman, "you cannot expect my husband to give up everything he conscientiously believes in and turn completely over to the other side."

"I am afraid I have no hope of any such thing. The question now is whether *you* are on my side."

"In all your efforts towards goodness—oh, yes. Indeed I am. I shall assist you most willingly."

Had she swallowed the whole dose or poured it surreptitiously away? Lady Wrotham believed that it had taken its proper channel and administered the subsequent sweetmeat.

"That is very good hearing," she said. "I can scarcely

say how much I shall welcome your help. I shall be glad to consult with you frequently. I have some important letters to write for the post this evening, but perhaps you will be kind enough to lunch with me to-morrow, and then we can go into matters together for an hour or so and drive out afterwards."

Mrs. Prentice took her leave, cheered somewhat by the proffer of intimacy, but not otherwise in the most equable state of mind. She found her husband engaged in mowing the tennis lawn, going at his task with such vigour that beads of perspiration stood on his brow, although the air of the Spring evening was not exactly sultry.

"Do put your coat on, William," said Mrs. Prentice as she joined him. "You will catch your death of cold."

The Vicar stopped and wiped his brow. "I will put it on when I have finished," he said. "I am rather worried by the old lady's interference, and hard work helps me to throw off my annoyance. Well, have *you* been hauled over the coals too?"

"I will tell you all about it when you have put on your coat," said Mrs. Prentice. "You will certainly catch cold if you stand there talking in that state."

The Vicar with a sigh resumed his black jacket. "Well?" he said.

"I have had a talk with Lady Wrotham," said Mrs. Prentice. "William, I am sure she means well."

"I dare say she does," replied the Vicar. "Most busybodies do mean well. The question is, have you succeeded in conveying to her that it will be better for her to keep from interfering with me in my work?"

Mrs. Prentice thought that on the whole she had succeeded in conveying that impression. At least she said so. "But I think, just for the sake of peace," she added, "that it will be wiser, for a time at any rate, to make the services as plain as possible, so as not to give her a handle for further interference. She talks about complaining to the bishop."

"She may complain as much as she likes. The bishop is a trimmer, and has given some very unfair decisions. But there is nothing that goes on here that he can object to. We are not extremists."

"But, William, think of the scandal it will create if she really makes up her mind to have her own way—or to take steps to have it. Whether she succeeds or not the state of strife would do so much harm."

"I am afraid it would, but I am not going to alter things for the sake of preventing it. And how can you ask me to do so, Agatha? You have been continually urging me to go faster. Have you forgotten how you pressed me to celebrate a choral mass every Sunday at eleven o'clock so that the people should be compelled to come to it; and when I said that they were not ready for it you called me, if you remember, a renegade priest?"

"You should not recall everything I say in the heat of argument."

"Quite so; but what would you feel if I had done what you wished, and Lady Wrotham had come in on Sunday morning at the beginning of the service instead of the end? And what would she have done, I wonder?"

The picture was too painful. Mrs. Prentice shuddered. "I acknowledge that you were wiser than I," she said. "But if you used expediency there, as you did, why not carry it a little further? You need not give up any of your convictions."

"I do not intend to, nor anything that I have set on foot after mature consideration. What do you propose that I shall alter? What are her ladyship's minimum demands?"

"She did not make any definite demands. But it is the ritual she objects to. Of course, you know, William, ritual is not necessary as long as the faith is taught."

"Then you propose that I shall give up the small amount

of ritual we have here, and go on teaching the faith? And you think that Lady Wrotham will be content with that? I don't. If I know anything about the school of which she is one of the chief ornaments, she will object just as strongly to the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and sacramental grace as to eucharistic vestments. No. Peace does not lie in that direction."

"Well, I do think for the present it will be well to give in to her a little. I am sure she is a religious woman, and if she is not upset now she will gradually come round to see that you have done good here, and she will withdraw her opposition."

"Oh, Agatha, Agatha! You can't do it, you know."

"Can't do what, pray?"

"Serve God and mammon. It would be very pleasant, no doubt, to be the bosom friend of Lady Wrotham. But you can't be that and keep true to your convictions as well. You had better make your choice now, for you will have to make it sooner or later."

Mrs. Prentice drew herself up. "I think you are making a great mistake in identifying Lady Wrotham with mammon," she said. "That is not the way to win mistaken souls to your side. And in some ways I am not certain that she *is* mistaken. I am sure, at any rate, that in her heart of hearts she desires the right. And as long as I can I will remain her friend and endeavour to guide her."

The Vicar laughed, and seized the handle of his mowing-machine. "You will do that," he said, "when this machine guides me. I shall just have time to finish this before dinner."

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT

THERE was a surprise in store for Mrs. Prentice the next morning, for as she walked down the village on her way to keep her appointment at the Abbey, she was overtaken by Lady Wrotham's carriage, and in it was seated, very much at his ease, the young man whom she had made such earnest efforts to entertain a fortnight or so before. Lord Wrotham favoured her with an inquiring stare, and drove on ahead of her.

"Dear me," said Mrs. Prentice to herself, "I did not know he was expected."

No one knew when to expect Lord Wrotham at any time. He was a restless being, and would take the longest journey at the shortest notice whenever the spirit moved him. His mother had received a telegram early in the morning to say that he was about to pay her a visit, and was to be met at such and such a train. Why he had come, and the length of time he intended to stay, she knew no more than Mrs. Prentice. That lady, fired by curiosity, hurried her footsteps, and arrived at the Abbey in time to share in the disclosure of his lordship's purpose.

"Ah, how do you do, Mrs. Prentice," said the young man cordially, when he was introduced to her. "Very sorry I couldn't accept your kind invitation the other day, but Browne and I were driven off our legs. So much to see to, you know. I was just telling my mother that I've come down to have a look at the Fisheries. We hadn't time to go up there the other day."

Lady Wrotham did not appear to be entirely satisfied with this explanation, or indeed overjoyed at the visit. She sat stiffly in her chair, her eyes fixed upon the pleasant, alert

face of her son, with no very marked expression of maternal pride or pleasure. But Mrs. Prentice could find no fault with the young man's attitude to his mother, and wondered what there was behind the scenes to have created the antagonism which Lady Wrotham had practically admitted to her as existing between herself and her son.

"I'm thinking of starting a fish hatchery up at Shelbraith, you know, mother," he said. "It's always been an idea of mine."

"This is the first I have heard of it," replied Lady Wrotham. "I think you should go very carefully into the matter before you start such an undertaking. I know that your father spent a great deal of money rather unsatisfactorily here, and was glad enough when this Captain—what is his name?—Captain Turner rented them from him."

"Oh, I've gone into it like anything. It'll pay hand over fist, and won't cost much to start."

"That was not your father's experience."

"Father never had any experience at all. Old Tetheradge, who was here before Browne, persuaded him into it and made a mess of it, as he did of everything else. Turner is making it pay, so Browne says. I'm going to get Browne to take me up after lunch. Well, mother, how do you find Exton agree with you? Feeling pretty buckish, eh?"

"I wish you would not use those expressions to me, George," replied Lady Wrotham. "I am not one of your companions of the race-course. I have no doubt I shall be very well here when I have settled down. At present I am not quite myself. Mrs. Prentice, I am afraid I must ask you to excuse my driving with you this afternoon. I had a sleepless night; I must rest."

It was plain that she was unwell, and that only her strength of will enabled her to get through the meal which followed, and take her part in the conversation. Mrs. Prentice was full

of sympathy, but was not altogether sorry to be relieved of the ordeal of a further cross-examination, which, for all her anxiety to please, might have ended in an open breach. Lord Wrotham, beyond a perfunctory expression of sorrow, did not display much solicitude for his mother's indisposition, but chatted gaily to both the ladies.

"Have you got to know the inhabitants yet, mother?" he asked, when they had been some time at table. "Seen Turner yet?"

"No. I shall be glad, George, if you will ask Mr. Browne to bring Captain Turner to drink tea with me. The ladies living in the place will, of course, call upon me. But a bachelor may, perhaps, require an invitation."

"I'll tell him, mother. Seen Mrs. Redcliffe yet?"

"Not yet," replied Lady Wrotham, and Mrs. Prentice set her lips together.

"Very nice lady," pursued Wrotham; "you're sure to like her, and her daughter's a very charming girl. You're lucky to have such people in the place, Mrs. Prentice."

Mrs. Prentice did not look as if she thought herself lucky, but she felt bound to make some reply to the observation. "The White House has been made very attractive since it was enlarged," she said.

Wrotham threw a quizzical look at her. "Charming little cottage," he said. "Then you don't care about the people who live in it, eh, Mrs. Prentice?"

"I did not say so, Lord Wrotham," she replied.

"No, but it's quite plain," he persisted. "Little quarrel, eh? The ladies, bless 'em, they're never quite happy unless there's a trifle of an upset going on, are they? But they are just as good friends to each other in spite of it. We men can't equal them there. If we quarrel we quarrel, and there's an end of it."

Lady Wrotham interposed. "I think you are letting your

tongue run away with you, George," she said, as if she were correcting a small, troublesome boy. "Mrs. Prentice has given you no reason to assume that she has quarrelled with anybody."

"I am not of a quarrelsome mood, Lord Wrotham," said Mrs. Prentice sweetly.

"And I'm sure Mrs. Redcliffe isn't," said Wrotham. "Don't know when I've met a lady I liked better. I expect you will get on with her like anything, mother."

"You will perhaps leave me to make my own friends in my own way, George," said Lady Wrotham.

"Why, certainly, mother. Do you know if Mrs. Redcliffe has anything to do with Francis Redcliffe who lives at Riverslea in Worcestershire? He was at Eton with me."

"I believe her husband was Sir Francis's uncle, but, as I tell you, I do not know Mrs. Redcliffe. Mrs. Prentice will tell you anything you wish to know about her, though I cannot see why you should betray such a lively interest in a lady you have only met once, and are not likely to meet again."

"Oh, I like to know all about everybody, especially people living on one's own place."

Mrs. Prentice, believing that she now had permission to imply a secret reason for her attitude, said, "You will find, I think, Lord Wrotham, that Mrs. Redcliffe has reasons for not putting forward any claim on her relations. She is living at Exton as quietly as possible—one might almost say hidden."

But Lady Wrotham stopped her at once. "I thought it was understood," she said severely, "that we were not to discuss what we know of Mrs. Redcliffe. I certainly thought it was understood, Mrs. Prentice."

Mrs. Prentice quailed under the stony glance of displeasure and was beginning to quaver apologies, but Lady Wrotham

proceeded: "Since so much has been said, I may as well tell you, George, that Mrs. Redcliffe's husband married his deceased wife's sister. Apparently the fact was not known here, but I was not aware of that when I mentioned it to Mrs. Prentice the other day. She comes from Australia, and I heard of the marriage when your father and I were out there. I should not have divulged her secret if I had known it was a secret."

"Of course not, mother. You needn't be afraid of me. I won't say a word to anybody. And anyhow, if it was in Australia, it was all right. So it will be here before long. Well, I must be off. I'll come in again to say good-bye. I've told 'em to be ready to take me back to the station about five o'clock."

He was out of the room and the house within two minutes, somewhat to the astonishment of Mrs. Prentice, who had not quite finished her glass of port wine. Lady Wrotham expressed no astonishment. "I must see this Miss Redcliffe," she remarked oracularly. "There is one thing; it will not last very long."

Lord Wrotham walked quickly out of the gate house and up the road. When he reached the gate of the White House he turned in and went up the drive, and, ringing at the door and inquiring for Mrs. Redcliffe, presently found himself in that lady's parlour, where she and Hilda were sitting.

"I thought I would just look in on my way up to Browne," he said. "And how are you, Mrs. Redcliffe?"

Mrs. Redcliffe said that she was well, and Hilda, next interrogated, gave a satisfactory account of her health.

"Well, I've just been lunching with my mother," he said, sitting himself in an easy-chair in the window. "By the bye, I must keep a lookout for old Browne, in case he goes down before I get to him. He doesn't know I'm here. I've come to have a look at the Fisheries. I say, Mrs. Redcliffe,

can't you and Miss Redcliffe come up with us? You know Turner, of course. There'll be room for four of us in Browne's cart."

"I think not, thank you, Lord Wrotham," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "Hilda and I were thinking of driving over to Oakhurst this afternoon."

"Can't you do that another afternoon? I've just snatched to-day to come down. Let's make a little expedition of it. It's up in the woods, isn't it? Do let's all go together. I'm a bit shy, you know. I want backing up."

He laughed agreeably, and Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda laughed too. "We could go to Oakhurst to-morrow, mother," Hilda said.

Just at that moment Wrotham espied Browne's burly figure walking down the road past the garden, and dashed out to intercept him. Hilda laughed again. "Do let us go, mother," she said. "He is such fun—not in the least like anybody else. And I'm sure he likes us both."

"We will see what Mr. Browne says," answered her mother, which was as good as a surrender.

So presently they were walking up through the woods to Browne's house, Wrotham on ahead with Hilda, and the older pair following more sedately.

"Now that's what I call a nice-looking pair," said round, forty-year-old Browne, without prejudice, and indeed the slim, youthful-looking couple, with their springy, active walk, might have evoked some such expression of opinion from any one who saw them together.

Lord Wrotham possessed in an eminent degree that faculty not rare amongst the lively-natured, self-assured, of ingratiating himself at a pace a good deal quicker than the ordinary speed-limit with the more comely of the opposite sex. He could do more than ingratiate himself. He could, by delicately shaded but always advancing degrees, and with-

out laying himself open to rebuff even from the most timorous, drive a colloquy on to that plane where admiration may be openly tendered without offence, and at least a reciprocal interest implied, if not expressed. Many of the numerous fair ones whom he honoured by his attentions would have resented with offended sincerity the charge of flirtation, so dexterously were they led into the winding maze; but the incense burnt at the shrine of beauty by this agreeable young man demanded a return of favour, and its light fumes were so searching that they usually attained their reward. Hilda Redcliffe was the least consciously coquettish of her sex, but she was so gay and bright, and so pretty, that she invited a more than usually ardent attack from a lover of those special qualities, and replied to it by a still more sparkling display of them. The walk through the woods from the White House to Upper Heath gate was a matter of ten minutes at the most, but by the time they had reached Browne's house she had been told that if Lord Wrotham had made her acquaintance before the arrangement was entered into by which his mother occupied Exton Abbey for her lifetime, he would not have consented to it, but taken up residence there himself. And she had parried the statement with a laughing reply, instead of showing surprise at its boldness. To this point had the expert in intimacy pushed his way.

They drove up to the Fisheries through the woods in Browne's dog-cart, Mrs. Redcliffe and Browne in front, Hilda and Wrotham clinging on behind as the wheels bumped slowly over the soft, uneven rides. Wrotham, with his elbow over the back of the seat, engaged the company in general conversation. "You'll go and call on my mother as soon as possible, now, I hope," he said to Mrs. Redcliffe. "She is ready and anxious to make your acquaintance."

Mrs. Redcliffe said nothing, and he went on.

"I know Frankie Redcliffe. He was at school with me—and at Cambridge too. But he seems to have buried himself lately. Model country landlord, and all that sort of thing. Dear old fellow, though. I should like to see him again."

"I do not know Sir Francis," Mrs. Redcliffe made haste to reply. "My husband was in Australia for the last years of his life, and I came to England for the first time after his death."

"Capital place Australia. I was out there for a year as a small boy. You weren't near Western Australia, were you?"

"No. I am a Queenslander."

"Then you never met my father and mother when they were playing at royalty out there. No, her ladyship said you hadn't, although she knew your name. Well, you'll have something to talk about together, at any rate. I say, Browne, Mrs. Prentice doesn't seem to be a very amiable lady. Got her knife into everybody, apparently."

"Oh, she's all right," said Browne, "if you take her in her own way."

"She isn't all right," said Hilda. "She is an interfering mischief-maker, and as for her manners ——!"

Mrs. Redcliffe did not come to the rescue of criticized humanity, as was her wont. She sat silent, looking forward along the purple vista of tree trunks and interlacing branches, as though she did not even hear what was being said.

But Wrotham turned to Hilda with a quizzical smile. "I say!" he exclaimed. "You're very severe. I'm afraid the lady isn't a great friend of yours."

"No, she isn't," Hilda replied. "Although, sometimes, if there is anything to be gained by it, she pretends to be."

"Well, I don't blame you for keeping her at arm's length. I've got an eye for character, and I think she's a bit of a pussy cat. But she seems to be very thick with my mother at

present. There's nothing they don't tell each other. Probably it won't last long. She doesn't know her ladyship yet."

Browne cleared his throat with determination. "This is the road up from the village," he said, as they turned into a broad, gravelled track. "We shall get to the rhododendron ring soon. It's worth looking at." Mrs. Prentice's name was then dropped out of the conversation.

They came to Turner's house, looking down the narrow valley, and alighted. "I say, this is a jolly place," said Wrotham. "That's Turner, I suppose. Let's go down to see what he's doing."

A tall, home-spun clad figure could be seen with its back towards them, gazing into one of the tanks some little way down the stream, while a man by his side was engaged in some hidden operation. Wrotham led the way at a quick pace along a grass garden path. He was now all eagerness to see what was going on, and had no apparent use for the moment for ladies' society. Browne tied his horse to a post and followed him, with Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda.

"What is the matter, mother darling?" asked Hilda. "You don't look well."

Mrs. Redcliffe was pale, but she gathered herself together. "I am quite well," she said. "But I think I will sit here for a bit, while you go and see what there is to be seen."

She sat down on a garden seat, and Hilda, after being assured again that there was nothing the matter with her, went on with Browne to the ponds.

Wrotham had already introduced himself to Turner, and was putting numerous inquiries to him by the time they came up. "Look here, Miss Redcliffe," he said. "This is jolly. See all these little beggars coming up to be fed?"

Turner's man had in his hand an inverted cone of perforated zinc, fastened to the end of a stick. It was full of finely-chopped food, the component parts of which need not be in-

quired into too closely. Every now and then he dipped it into the water and shook it gently. Tiny fragments escaped and were carried down the gentle stream, and scores of little whisking tails would dart out from under the shelter of the reed thatching to intercept them.

They watched the feeding for some time, and then Turner took them further down the chain of ponds. Wrotham plied him with questions, and seemed to get a complete grasp of all the many complicated and debatable details of the hatchery, with very little trouble. But he did not forget Hilda as he did so, passing on explanations and pointing out to her what had just been pointed out to him as if it was of as much importance that she should know how to construct a fish hatchery on the most approved principles as that he should.

"The mistake in making this place," said Turner, "was in digging the big ponds at the top and the tanks below. The water is poor and thin when it comes out of the spring, all right for the fry, but it's a lot of trouble to get enough life into it for the bigger fish. Then by the time it gets down here it is richer, and the sun has been at it. This is the proper place for the yearlings and the two-year-olds, but I've got to keep them up higher and the fry here. It would cost too much to alter it, but it ought never to have been made in that way."

"See, Miss Redcliffe?" said Wrotham. "You've got to be precious careful when you start a place like this. No good making mistakes that you can't put right afterwards."

"I see," said Hilda. "I'll be careful not to do it."

Browne and Turner were out of hearing as they walked back to the upper ponds. "That looks like a case," said Turner. "His lordship don't seem to have lost much time."

"Pooh!" said Browne. "He's like that with every pretty girl he meets. Doesn't mean anything. I say, I've been told to take you to tea with the old lady. Wants to make your acquaintance."

"Much rather leave her alone. Quite happy here by myself."

"Well, you'll have to come and be inspected. She insists on it. You needn't worry yourself after that."

Turner suddenly became excited. "That's the curse of English life," he said. "Why should I have to go and show myself to an old woman I don't care twopence about, because she lives in a big house and I live in a small one? I pay my rent regularly enough, and my rates and taxes too. Why can't I be let alone?"

Browne laughed. "I'll take you down and trot you out tomorrow afternoon," he said. "Then you can get back to your shell."

There followed further inspection and technical discussion, abruptly cut short by a demand for instant departure by Lord Wrotham. "I must get back," he said. "I shan't have much more than time to catch my train, and her ladyship's horses aren't accustomed to be bustled." So they got into the cart again rather hurriedly and drove away.

Lord Wrotham had apparently gained everything for which he had paid his unexpected visit to Exton, for there could have been few questions concerning the planning of a model fish hatchery which he had not asked and Turner had answered. But it appeared that he had not finished with Exton yet, for he told Hilda on the drive down that he intended to pay his mother a long visit in a week or two's time, and expressed the hope that they would meet frequently during its course.

As they passed through the gate leading from the wood into the park they saw Mrs. Prentice coming along the road towards them. Mrs. Redcliffe bowed to her as they passed, and Browne took off his hat. She favoured them with a gaze of astonishment and the merest inclination of her head. As the cart passed her she turned round, and adroitly shaded off a cold

stare at Hilda into a smiling recognition of Wrotham's greeting. The transition was so comical that a clear little trill of laughter escaped from Hilda's lips before she was aware of it. Mrs. Prentice turned sharp round in the road, and sent after her a look so full of bitter dislike that the girl became suddenly grave.

"I say, you've done it now," said Wrotham. "If looks could kill—eh?"

"I didn't mean to be rude," she said. "But I really couldn't help it. You didn't see how she tried to glare at me and smile at you, both at the same time."

"She's certainly got her claws out. Well, if she makes herself unpleasant you send for me, Miss Redcliffe. I'll look after you. Here we are. We've had a jolly afternoon. Good-bye. Good-bye, Mrs. Redcliffe. Good-bye, Browne. We shall all meet again soon." And Lord Wrotham disappeared through the gate leading into the Abbey gardens.

CHAPTER XIV

A DISCLOSURE

Mrs. Redcliffe chatted equably with Browne as they drove up to the White House. There was nothing to show that she was suffering distress of mind. When they reached home she went up to her room, removed her outdoor wraps, and sat down to think.

It was plain now that her secret was known, not only to Lady Wrotham, but to Mrs. Prentice. Her secret; yes, it had come to be that, and she had hidden it in her heart, hoping, for Hilda's sake, that it would never be divulged. And yet, when she had first come to England, now twenty years ago, she had had no intention of keeping the facts of her marriage secret, nor even any reason to feel ashamed of that marriage.

She let her thoughts wander back to the early years of her life, spent on a great cattle station in Northern Queensland. She again saw the big, deep-verandahed wooden house, in which she had been brought up with a curious mixture of English convention and wild liberty, the groups of outbuildings and stock-yards lying about it, the carefully irrigated garden, blossoming riotously with strange trees and fruits and flowers, the few cultivated fields, and, outside the little oasis of habitation, the illimitable distances of the bush, now parched and bare, now stung into miraculous verdure by a single night of tropical rain. She reviewed her childhood and girlhood, so monotonous to outward view that a few words would have sufficed to describe the breaks that there had been in it during twenty years—two or three journeys to Brisbane, a season at Sydney, an occasional visit to a distant station, or a drive of a hundred miles to an up-country race-meeting. These were

all, and yet the life had been full and happy. In her father's house, thirty miles distant from that of his nearest neighbour, there had been refinement, even luxury, a constant stream of books and periodicals, so that, though cut off by distance from the movement of the world, they were never in exile. There had been many visitors, frequently some welcome guest from the warm centres of life, of whom, in the intimacy created by isolation, there had been always a memory kept alive to mark the date of his stay. And the outdoor activities in the clear, sparkling air had nursed a radiant health, that made every dawn an excitement and every night a sweet, dreamless rest. She could recall nothing but happiness in those far-off years, during which she and her elder sister had been so perpetually and closely together that they had hardly had a thought or an action apart from one another.

She remembered, oh, so clearly, the excitement of preparing for a visit from the Governor of the colony, who was to stay for the night at her father's station, the coming and the going, and, blotting out every other recollection of the great day, the handsome young man in his suite, who from the very moment of dismounting from his horse, and looking up to see the two fair girls standing arms-entwined above him, had devoted himself to them; and, as he rode away the next morning, had looked up again, with a message in his eyes for one of them—or perhaps for either, for he seemed to have wooed them both in those few glamorous hours, and had certainly had no opportunity of speaking to either of them apart.

She remembered how changed the life of herself and her sister had been after that wonderful visit. Love had never so much as brushed them with his wings before, and now he had transfixed them both with one fiery arrow. And yet such was their mutual affection and confidence that they had been able to ease their laden bosoms of the sweet pain by saying to each other what other girls could only have whispered to

their own hearts; and it had brought them still closer together, if that were possible, for there was no faintest breath of jealousy, or self-seeking, in the mind of either of them.

A few weeks later he had come again, released from attendance on his chief, and when he went away a month later he took the elder sister with him as his bride. Surely it had been the strangest of wooings; a love idyll in which one heart beat for two, and two as one. But that could only last until the idyllic stage merged into the desire for marriage on the part of the perplexed lover. A word, a breath from the actual had brought the younger of the two sisters to the earth. It needed scarcely more than the bitter hour she spent by herself, almost the first in which she had intentionally kept apart from her twin soul, to incline the balance against her, and the end came quickly when the one, still innocently and gladly, accepted the homage, and the other stood back and closed up her heart.

And so the elder sister took her happiness and went away, and the younger stayed behind, having been bereft of sister and lover at one stroke.

Then within a year had come the tragedy of death, and following it quickly the second wooing, so different from the first, as the sweetness of autumn, resting on loss and knowledge, is different from the sharp new sweetness of Spring. It was the wooing by a saddened man of a girl with a woman's soul, tender and experienced, and it fed on feelings that neither had known before sorrow had come to them. But both of them were young, and the life which followed the second marriage was full of deep happiness for the few short years that it lasted. Then the gallant husband and lover had died suddenly, and once again there was deep sorrow, and no hope of gladness any more.

Mrs. Redcliffe sat with her hands in her lap, looking out of the window across the fresh green of the park, and the waving tree branches under the westering sun, for a long time.

This was her story up to the time of her coming to England twenty years before, and it contained what women like Mrs. Prentice—better women than Mrs. Prentice, and men too—called a deadly sin,—she forced herself to use the word —adultery. Her face burned, but not with shame. Hilda might have been startled if she had been with her now, for never in the whole of her twenty years had she seen a look of anger on that quiet and still beautiful face. Up to that point in her story had she anything to reproach herself with? Loyalty to her dead husband, to her dearly-loved sister, to the virgin purity of her own girlhood, refuted all blame. There, she was in arms against the world, if the world should condemn her.

But afterwards! There, indeed, she might have taken a wrong step, or refrained from taking a right one. She had never told Hilda of her father's previous marriage.

She had stayed in Australia for six months of her widowhood. During that time her father had died, and there was nothing to keep her in a country which contained now only the graves of those she had loved, for her mother had died too, during her early childhood. She made up her mind to come home to England, and bury herself and her baby in some quiet country village, to which, in the sickness of her soul, she looked as a haven of peace and healing. She was almost entirely without friends in England, for her father's station, and that which her husband had bought after his first marriage, were both many miles away from civilization, and in the latter especially she had been cut off from society, and had made few friends since her girlhood. So there was no friend to whom she cared to go when she landed in the strange country which she had always been accustomed to call "home." Her husband's family had dwindled till there was only left one small boy, who was being brought up in his ancestral home by his mother's relations. Her father's

family, so far as she knew, was extinct; he had not been in England for thirty years, and long before his death had ceased to correspond with any relations he might have had. She and her baby were alone in the world, and she must begin her life again and make new friends, for the child's sake, if not for her own.

It was not until she had lived in England for a year or more that the poor lady gained the added distress of feeling that, in the eyes of many of her neighbours, her position, if it were known, would be considered an equivocal one. Her life had been spent in ways so far apart from the mass of mankind that it had never once suggested itself to her mind, nor had it been suggested to her from outside, that her marriage was in any way irregular. The shock she sustained when she learnt that by English law her child was illegitimate was severe, and she received one still more severe when it was brought home to her that there were those who would regard her marriage, did they know of its circumstances, as no marriage at all, but a sin against righteousness. It had never been her intention to keep from her child the knowledge of her sister's marriage. It would have seemed the most natural thing to tell her all about that dearly loved sister, when she should be of an age to understand, and of the mingled sadness and happiness of her own life. But how could she do so in the light of her new knowledge? The very statement of the facts would take the shape of an excuse, and she had no mind to excuse herself or her husband to their daughter. And besides, even if the child were brought to regard the story in the light that her mother would desire—the light in which she herself regarded it—as of course she would have been taught, she could not be told to keep it secret; and if she spoke of it to others who did not know of it, there might be a rude awakening for her.

Any kind of concealment was alien from Mrs. Redcliffe's nature, but the circumstances in which she was placed made

the concealment that she did practise only passive. She lived for ten years in a moorland sea-coast village in Yorkshire, very quietly, seeing but few people of her own class, and those for the most part her neighbours. None of them knew her past history, and it would have seemed like a desecration of something holy to speak of it to them. In her somewhat unusual innocence of the ways of the world it did not occur to her that, even if no rumour from the world that had known her brought the facts of her marriage to the light, there might arise circumstances—her daughter's marriage, for instance—in which she would have to disclose them. And so, merely keeping her peace, she had let Hilda grow up without the knowledge.

For some time now she had said to herself that she had been mistaken, that she ought to have prepared her daughter for what she must know sooner or later, at a time when the story would have made no painful impression on the child's mind. She had prepared herself, at any rate, for the necessity of telling her before very long, but had not yet fixed a date for doing so; not through lack of courage, for when she saw the necessity for any action, however painful, it was not her habit to delay taking it. But she shrank from the necessity of distressing Hilda, and there had arisen no occasion which made one time more than another seem suitable for the disclosure.

But now, as she sat quietly at her window, thinking over these things, with the sole desire to act rightly with regard to them, she saw that the time had come, and, if she were to delay longer, Hilda might come to know of the secret which concerned her, not from her own mother but from some unsympathetic stranger.

It would be a very painful matter to tell her. Mrs. Redcliffe was not disposed to dwell on the pain it would bring to herself, but she wanted above all to make the disclosure in a

way which would absolve her husband's name and her own youth from blame. She could not accept blame, and, knowing her daughter as she did, she had little fear but that the girl would warmly espouse her cause. But it was the very attitude of espousal that she dreaded. By her confession—for her tale must take the form of a confession—she must definitely take up the attitude of one having, however unknowingly, broken an accepted law. And part of the trouble was that she had come tacitly to accept the law, as a social, if not a religious, ordinance. She was not of the stuff of which rebels against convention are made. If she had known at the time of her marriage what she knew now, it would not have taken place. She had put away from her the half-proffered love when she had first drawn back and allowed her sister to take the happiness which she then resigned for herself. And she would not have allowed the love to spring up again in her heart and accepted the happiness after all, if she had known of a law that would have forbade her. Renunciation was a flower that grew readily in the soil of her nature, and happiness would blossom alongside of it, but not by choking it out.

Then she must accuse herself to her daughter of having done something which she would not have done if she had had more knowledge, something that she would be sorry to know that another woman had done with her eyes open. Her unflinching honesty faced her with that dilemma; for it was a dilemma. When all had been said that could be said against her marriage, she could not regret it, nor suffer her daughter to look upon it as anything but a perfect and God-blessed union. How should she reconcile these two opposing views? They were irreconcilable, and at last she took refuge in the thought that there was something definite to be gone through, and that its difficulty could not be softened by further cogitation. She must tell Hilda her story at once, and

tell it without reservation or excuses, and afterwards, they two together must make what adjustments they could.

Then she arose and prepared herself, kneeling at her bedside, and went down to her daughter. She told her that she had something serious to say to her, and they went into a little room off the parlour, where they would not be likely to be disturbed.

"Hilda darling," she said, "I have something to tell you which perhaps you ought to have known years ago. I feel now, for reasons which I will tell you later, that I must not keep it from you any longer, and you must listen carefully, so that you may not misjudge."

Hilda's eyes were fixed upon her with some fear. She could see that her mother, beneath her placid exterior, was deeply moved, and that she dreaded the ordeal that lay before her.

"Mother dear," she said, "don't tell me if it hurts you. Please don't. Everything you do is right; and if you haven't told me before, you must have had the best reasons for not doing so."

"There were no best reasons," said her mother. "It was difficult to know what to do. But there are reasons now why you must hear what I have to tell you, and perhaps share some trouble with me."

"Then I will listen," said the girl. "You have never let me share any trouble, mother; you have kept everything but happiness away from me." She took her mother's hand and pressed it. And then Mrs. Redcliffe told her story.

"I have told you of my dear sister," she said, "and of how we were brought up closely together and loved each other. Perhaps I have not talked to you quite as much as I should have liked to do, because of what I was keeping back. But you do know, I think, how much we were to each other throughout our girlhood, so that until—until her marriage, we were almost as one."

"Her marriage!" Hilda would have echoed, but that her instinct told her to keep silence.

"When your dear father came to us as a young man, we were all three constantly together. We both loved him, and made no secret of our love to each other, and he loved both of us in a way, perhaps, that some might find it difficult to understand. But he had to choose one of us, and, Hilda dear, this is what I have never told you before, he chose—her."

She was silent for a space, choosing the words that were to follow.

"Yes, mother dear," said Hilda softly, but it was plain that she did not yet understand.

"They were married," said Mrs. Redcliffe, speaking more quickly. "But she died in less than a year, and then he came back to me. It was not difficult for me to love him. It would have been very difficult for any woman not to do so. I had always loved him, and there was nothing that I then knew of, nothing in my mind or my knowledge of the world, that could have held me back from accepting his love. And my dear sister, before she died, urged him to marry me; so that there could be no feeling that we were acting disloyally to her memory, which was always cherished between us."

She breathed a deep sigh. She had taken the plunge, and the worst was over; but the strain had been great.

"Yes, mother dear," said Hilda again, gently. She looked at her mother's eyes, withheld from her, as if she expected something more, and when nothing more came, she said, "But is that all? Why couldn't you have told me that before?"

"Oh, Hilda, can't you see?" cried Mrs. Redcliffe, with agitation. "I didn't know until afterwards—I had no idea, until your father died, and I came to England with you, a tiny baby, that—that mine was a marriage which is not—not

recognized in this country. In Australia it is different, but I had never heard that there was anything against it."

"But what could there be against it, mother?"

"Hilda, you have lived more in the world than I did in my girlhood. You have heard of things which you may not have thought over, but which are not quite unfamiliar to you, as they were to me. You have heard that there have been discussions about—I must use the odious phrase—marriage with the deceased wife's sister."

"Oh!" The girl's face changed involuntarily. Her mother went on quickly, her voice taking an intonation that was almost pleading. "I have come to see that—in some cases—there may be reasons why such marriages might not be advisable, but not in my own case. No one who knew the circumstances could say so. I enjoyed perfect happiness, and all my nature was lifted and deepened by it. There could have been no more perfect marriage, and it was only made more perfect by what had gone before. Whatever wrong thing I did, I could not commit the wickedness of regretting it. I should be sinning against the light that has been given me if I tried to do so. I was blessed in it, as well as made perfectly happy. Whatever may be said—against—it would be a lie to say that my marriage was displeasing to God."

"Oh, mother, but who could say such a thing?"

"There are many who would say it; many religious people."

"Not good people."

"Yes, good people; though I know from my own inward experience that they would be wrong."

"I should not mind what such people said."

"I cannot say that I do not mind. I mind to some extent for my own sake, but not perhaps very much, as the step that they would blame me for has brought me more good than any other I have ever taken. But I mind very much for your

sake, my darling, and that is why I have kept the knowledge of the truth from you."

Hilda threw herself at her mother's feet and embraced her. "Dearest mother," she said in tears, "I wish you had told me before. How could you think—oh, you can't think, that I should not be glad to shield you from the unjust things narrow-minded people might say, that I should want to be apart from you in this or in anything."

"No, darling; I know. I don't think I have ever doubted that you would feel like that about what I have told you. But it has been so difficult to tell. I have often said to myself that I could not tell you without appearing to be excusing myself, and I am too proud of the memory of my married life, and of your father's memory, to bear the thought of excusing anything in it."

"Oh, no, mother. And now you will talk to me more of it, won't you? You will tell me about father when you first knew him, and of Aunt Margaret."

"Yes. That will be one of my consolations. I would so often have liked to tell you more than I have been able to do, for fear you should ask me questions that I was not prepared to answer. But, Hilda, I have not told you yet why I have had to make up my mind, quickly at last, to tell you of this now. It has so happened that no one in England has known of it hitherto, no one whom we in our quiet way of life have met. If it had not been so, I must have told you before. I could not have helped it. But Lady Wrotham knows, and we may have to prepare ourselves for cold looks."

"Lady Wrotham, mother? How does she know?"

"You heard what Lord Wrotham said. She knows the family to which your father belonged, although I have never mentioned the connection to any one in England—not because there was any reason for concealing it, but because no occasion has arisen which would lead me to do so. And she

was in Australia at the time of my marriage. Your father may have known her when he was *aide-de-camp* to Lord Chippenham, the Governor of Queensland, though if he did he never mentioned it to me."

"But surely, mother, Lady Wrotham would not say anything to any one else if—I mean until she had seen you."

"I should have thought not; but I very much doubt whether she has not already done so."

"To Lord Wrotham, you mean?"

"He must know, I should think, but I should not expect him to attach any great importance to it, either one way or the other. He would not take the strictest view, and it would be enough for him that in the colonies such marriages as mine are as regular as others. No, I do not mean Lord Wrotham. I am nearly certain that she must have told Mrs. Prentice."

"Oh, mother, that woman!"

"I am afraid that it is so. And Mrs. Prentice is just the woman who, I am afraid, would think herself bound by her religious creed to make the worst of what irregularity there is."

"Then that accounts for her horrid behaviour to you on Sunday and to-day. I thought that it was just snobbishness and jealousy."

"I think that Lady Wrotham has told her."

"Then I think that she ought to be ashamed of herself. What kind of woman can she be to come down here, and, before she has even seen you, to make scandal?—and with Mrs. Prentice, of all people!"

"It would not be the act of a charitable woman. But we must be prepared for its having taken place. People will talk—I fear there is no doubt of it, for if Mrs. Prentice knows, as I think she does, she will not keep it to herself. The talk will not last long. I am what I am, and it will make little difference in the long run. Those whose friend-

ship is worth having will not withdraw it. I can go through with it, but oh, Hilda darling, you must go through it too, and it will take away something of your youth and your trust in mankind. You must see, even in this small place, something of the cruel side of the world, and I would so willingly have had you blind to it a few years longer."

"Mother dear, I am glad of it. Yes, I am glad. If trouble comes to you because of what you have told me, I shall share it with you; and if I could love you better than I do now, it would make me. We have been close together, haven't we? And now we shall be closer still. Dearest, I know it must have hurt you to tell me, but you do feel now that it is a relief, don't you?"

Mrs. Redcliffe kissed her. "Yes, it is a relief," she said, the tears in her eyes. "And now we must go about our work and live our life just as usual. We are both prepared for what may come, and we need not fear it."

They went out of the room together. The bitter hour was over, and the sting was drawn from what should come after it. But Mrs. Redcliffe felt sorrowfully that life could never be quite the same to her child as it had been before.

CHAPTER XV

DISCORD

It was hardly to be supposed that the passive, collected waiting on developments which, to Mrs. Redcliffe, was the natural attitude to take up in face of difficulties, would commend itself to a girl of Hilda's ardent temperament. When she thought over the disclosures that had been made to her, it was not with any regard to those disclosures themselves, except as they revealed to her a hitherto unknown passage in her mother's life. She gave no thought to the general problem in which they were involved. She did not even tell herself that her mother had done right. There was no question of right or wrong in her mind. She started with the undiscussed assumption that her mother had done right, and her anger burnt hotly against the world which would blame her. She viewed all mankind with suspicion, and emptied her mind of friendship to every one, since none had as yet had an opportunity of espousing warmly her mother's cause, and from henceforward she would have no friends who did not do so. But most of all her anger burnt against those who had already taken a side, or so she thought, against her mother, and she could not rest until she had confronted them, and shown her wrath and contempt. To her mother she was all tenderness and gaiety, and Mrs. Redcliffe's sore heart gained some solace from the thought that the girl's spirit was not subdued by what she had told her. If she had had any idea of the ferment of anger and rebellion going on in Hilda's mind, she would have greatly feared.

Hilda met Mrs. Prentice the next morning on her way to the village. She drew in her breath as she saw her enemy approaching her, and went on to meet her, outwardly calm,

but raging inwardly like a young tiger ready for the spring. Mrs. Prentice was for giving her the merest shadow of a bow and passing on her way with her nose in the air, but Hilda stood in front of her.

"Will you please tell me," she said, "why you have suddenly taken to cutting me in the road?"

Mrs. Prentice was taken aback for the moment. The girl spoke quietly, but her nostrils were dilated, and there was a look in her eyes which gave the older woman a sensation of discomfort. But it was not for long. It was not her custom to refuse battle. She gloried in it when she was not afraid of offending, and she leapt at once to the fray.

"Cutting you!" she echoed. "Why should I take the trouble to cut you, I wonder?"

"That is what I want to know," said Hilda. "At least, I don't mind your cutting me in the least, but my mother—I should like to know what is the reason of your abominable behaviour to her."

Mrs. Prentice lost her temper at once. "How dare you speak to me in that fashion, you impudent girl!" she exclaimed.

"Because you deserve it," replied Hilda. "My mother is the best woman in the world, and she has always been kind and good to you. Only a week ago she entertained you, and when she asked you to come to our house on Sunday you could hardly give her a civil answer. Any one would think it was a condescension on your part to give us your company."

"It would be a condescension," replied Mrs. Prentice angrily. "I hope never to darken your mother's doors again."

Hilda became icy calm, but her face grew white. "You never shall," she said, "but you shall tell me why you say so."

"I shall not tell you," cried Mrs. Prentice. "Let me pass."

But Hilda stood in her way. "You shall not go till you have told me," she said.

Mrs. Prentice saw her way to wound. "You had better ask Mrs. Redcliffe yourself," she said. "She will know well enough why no woman whose life is guided by the laws of the Christian religion will enter her house."

"*Your* life guided by the Christian religion!" repeated Hilda in a low voice. "I think you are the most irreligious woman I have ever known, full of spite and meanness. You are not fit to tie my mother's shoe-laces."

"You shall pay for this," said Mrs. Prentice, quivering. "*You* to dare to speak to me like that! You with your brazen face! I have always disliked you from the first. You have tried your best to get my son into your toils, and now that there is higher game in view you are pursuing that in the same shameless way."

"I don't in the least know what you mean," replied Hilda. "Except that you are probably trying to hatch some false scandal against me. As for Fred, you know as well as I do that you are telling a lie. I don't mind at all what you say about that. Nobody will believe you. Your spiteful tongue is too well known. But you had better be careful what you say about my mother."

She stopped and turned round quickly, for Mrs. Prentice's face, looking past her for a moment, had changed. Mrs. Redcliffe was coming down the road, and had almost reached them.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Prentice, "you had better let me pass. I have no wish to talk to Mrs. Redcliffe at present."

"No, but you shall," said Hilda. "Mother, this woman has been saying the most outrageous things. It is impossible to go on living in the same place with her unless we come to some understanding, now."

"I have been grossly insulted," said Mrs. Prentice, "and I will put up with it no longer. Thank heaven there is now no further need to pretend friendship. For the future we will meet as strangers. Perhaps I may now be allowed to continue on my way."

"I think, Mrs. Prentice," said Mrs. Redcliffe, "that Hilda is right. There are things that had better be said before we agree to treat each other as strangers."

"You say that she is right!" cried Mrs. Prentice. "She plants herself in front of me, preventing me almost by main force from going my way, and pours out a flood of vulgar abuse in the middle of the public road, and you say that she is right."

"I do not say that she was right to stop you in the road," said Mrs. Redcliffe, "but since matters have gone so far, we had better finish them once and for all."

"A vulgar wrangle in the middle of the road!" exclaimed Mrs. Prentice, "and I the wife of the Vicar! It is most unseemly, and, under the circumstances, it is worse than unseemly. I absolutely refuse to say anything more." And she began to walk up the hill.

But Mrs. Redcliffe turned with her. "Mrs. Prentice," she said, "you have known me for five years, and we have been, if not friends, certainly on friendly terms. I think you owe it to me to come in now and clear up what lies between us."

"What lies between us?" echoed Mrs. Prentice. "May I ask if you wish your daughter to know what, as you say, lies between us?"

Hilda broke in. "There is nothing you can talk about that I don't know," she said. "Do you think mother would keep from me anything that *you* could get hold of to harm her?"

"Hilda," said Mrs. Redcliffe peremptorily, "you must not

speak in that way. You are doing me no kindness. Come, Mrs. Prentice, you will hardly refuse to say to my face what you are ready to use against me behind my back."

Mrs. Prentice bridled. "I had no intention of saying a word to any one," she replied, "and should not have mentioned anything had it not been forced on me."

"You said, at any rate, that you would never darken our doors again," said Hilda, but in a quieter tone.

"And you have shown plainly that you wish to avoid me as much as possible," added Mrs. Redcliffe. "You could hardly expect to keep to yourself what you have learnt under those circumstances. You would certainly arouse discussion. I think that five years' intimacy give me a right to better treatment than that, Mrs. Prentice. I simply ask you to come in now, and let us have a clear understanding as to how we are to stand to one another for the future."

They had reached the gate of the White House. Mrs. Prentice would have preferred to have gone on her way, feeding her resentment with the memory of Hilda's attack upon her. But there was something compelling in Mrs. Redcliffe's quiet insistence.

"I have no objection," she said stiffly. "And I hope I shall not go out of the house without a full apology for the unpardonable language that Hilda has seen fit to use to me."

No answer was made to this suggestion, and they walked up the drive and into the house in silence, each collecting her thoughts for what was to follow.

Mrs. Prentice was the first to speak. "The matter is quite simple," she said, the moment she had seated herself. "Since you have told Hilda—which, I confess, I was surprised to hear—of the—the secret in your life, I can speak plainly. I do not wish to use words that would hurt you—personally—but, as a Churchwoman, I am taught to regard a marriage such as yours as no marriage at all, and I will not, no, I will not, whatever the

circumstances, even pretend to be on friendly terms, or indeed on any terms, with any one who has—has broken the Christian law in that respect."

"I should like to ask you, Mrs. Prentice, if you are really convinced that the responsibility of punishing me for my marriage rests upon you?" said Mrs. Redcliffe.

"Punishing!" repeated Mrs. Prentice, rather at a loss. "There is no question of my punishing you."

"Then for what reason are you refusing to live on friendly terms, or, as you say, on any terms, with me for the future?"

Mrs. Prentice hesitated for a moment. "It is not my fault," she said, "if I am obliged to use expressions that may offend you. The Church teaches, and I believe, that any one living—living in that way, under a—under a false marriage tie, is committing a sin."

"Living in what way, Mrs. Prentice?"

"Well, if you will have it, living with a man as your husband who, in the eyes of the Church, is not your husband."

"But I was married in a church, and in every way according to the laws of the country in which I lived."

"There are priests, I am well aware, who will break any of the laws of the Church if the law of the land allows them. It is quite enough for me that the Catholic Church *does* forbid such marriages."

"You feel so strongly on the matter that you cannot bring yourself to allow a woman, with whom you have lived in friendship for five years, any mercy. We are to be complete strangers to each other, and by your attitude to me you are to spread my story and invite others to hold aloof from me—from both me and my daughter, who, at any rate, has done nothing wrong, even according to your own strict rule."

"Hilda stands on quite another plane," said Mrs. Prentice. "I should refuse to have anything more to do with her for many reasons, even if this had not happened."

"There is no necessity to bring me in at all, mother," said Hilda. "Mrs. Prentice cordially dislikes me, and I certainly have neither liking nor respect for her. I think that people who are always talking of their religious views ought to show *some* small signs of Christian charity, and I have never seen any in her."

She got out her words against Mrs. Redcliffe's warning hand. Mrs. Prentice looked at her as with almost savage dislike. "I came in here against my will at your request," she said to Mrs. Redcliffe. "If that girl is allowed to speak to me in that way again I shall go out at once."

"Hilda, I have asked you to keep quiet," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "If you disobey me again you must go away."

Hilda shrugged her shoulders and withdrew her dress, the hem of which was touching Mrs. Prentice's.

"I will put it before you once more," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "I have no wish to plead with you, but for your own sake, as well as ours, I think you ought to be told something of the circumstances of my marriage. I had no idea until I came to England that there was anything in the least irregular in it—that it was not perfectly regular in any country in the world. Does that make no difference?"

"Perhaps it does in the manner of blame that is to be attached to it," replied Mrs. Prentice. "Not otherwise. If you sin against a law unwittingly, you still sin against it."

"I did not sin against the law of my country."

"I mean the law of the Church."

"And the English Church throughout Australia celebrates without question such marriages as mine."

"It may have done twenty years ago. I doubt whether it would now. But it makes no difference. I stand, as I said before, by the undoubted law of the Catholic Church."

"And none of the circumstances I have mentioned afford you a loophole, not for altering your convictions—I would

not ask you to do that—but for treating me as not quite outside the social pale. Because, Mrs. Prentice, that is what you are proposing to do. You are going to ignore every circumstance that would tell in my favour, and treat me just as you would an unfortunate woman who might come and live here, let us say, with another woman's husband."

"In my view that is what it comes to," said Mrs. Prentice. "I cannot palter with my beliefs. A union with a deceased wife's sister is either a marriage, or it is not. I hold that it is not, and no circumstances can make it so."

"Very well, then, we will leave that point. And now will you tell me what you would have me to do?"

"Do?" echoed Mrs. Prentice. "I do not quite understand you."

"Twenty years ago I committed—unknowingly, as I have told you—what you call a sin. Is my punishment to last for ever?"

"You repeat the word punishment, Mrs. Redcliffe. And I repeat that I should not have the audacity to take it upon myself to punish you. Besides, I *should* say that if you did what you did unknowingly—which I should have hardly thought possible ——"

"You will not refuse to believe, I hope, that I am telling you the truth when I say I did not know?"

"No, I accept what you say. And what I mean is that I don't think actual blame would attach to you *until* you did know. Then the union in my view—and the Church's view—would become a sin."

"And it is because of that sin that you decide that you must for the future hold aloof from me?"

"Yes. I do regard it as a sin."

"But my husband has been dead twenty years, Mrs. Prentice, and he was dead when I first discovered that in some respects my marriage was irregular."

Mrs. Prentice was dumb.

Mrs. Redcliffe went on in her quiet voice. "So you see," she said, "that unless you are anxious to punish me for doing many years ago what you say, under the circumstances of my ignorance, I could not be blamed for—and you deny that you wish to punish me—you are holding aloof from me for—well, perhaps you will tell me for what."

Mrs. Prentice grew flustered. "You may better me in argument," she said, "but I know all the same that I am right, and I should be false to my convictions if I acted otherwise."

"Otherwise than how?"

"Than by showing that, however much I regret the necessity, I cannot hold company with those who break laws that I hold to be sacred, and defend themselves for breaking them. Yes, that is the point; I see it now. You defend your marriage. Your eyes have been opened to the truth and you do not repent. You are undoubtedly living in a state of sin until you do. If your husband were alive you would still be living with him. The fact of his death makes no difference."

Mrs. Redcliffe rose, her face a deep red. "We need say no more," she began; but Hilda broke in, rising too—

"Let her go, mother!" she cried. "Her hypocrisy is beyond bearing. It makes me feel positively sick. You have treated her with the most splendid patience and forbearance, and have shown her plainly that she has no excuse even from her own point of view. She hates you because you are good and she is not. She only wants an excuse for her wicked spite. She is glad—you can see it in her face—that she has something to use against you. Let her go! It is you who cannot have anything more to do with her. You can't live any longer in friendship with a mean and contemptible woman like that. She is too far beneath you."

She poured forth her words in a torrent of scorn and indig-

nation. Her mother made no effort to stop her. Mrs. Prentice, rising with the others, confronted her with a furious face, and tried once or twice to break in on her, but her voice was borne down by the girl's anger.

"This is what I let myself in for," cried Mrs. Prentice. "This girl—the daughter of an unholy alliance ——"

Mrs. Redcliffe laid a hand on her arm. "Stop!" she said. "Say no more. You shall have your way; we will not meet again as friends. Hilda is right. You have shown your enmity towards me, and the Christianity which is so much on your lips is worthless. You think wickedly and you speak wickedly. You may go now; and I will have nothing more to do with you."

"That indeed you won't," returned Mrs. Prentice, bursting with spite and preparing for her departure. "And I shall take very good care that others whom you would give your ears to be friends with shall not have anything to do with *you*. It is a disgrace that you should be living in the place."

Hilda took a step forward. "If you don't go at once I will turn you out," she said. "You shall not speak to my mother in that way. And you may tell your new friend that she did a very wicked thing when she gave a woman like you a weapon to use against my mother."

Mrs. Prentice was at the door. "I shall certainly tell Lady Wrotham all about your outrageous behaviour," she said. "And I shall do my best to get her to turn you out of the place. It is intolerable that you should be living here beside respectable and God-fearing people."

Hilda, who had almost lost control of herself, would have followed her with another taunt, but Mrs. Redcliffe restrained her, and she threw herself into her mother's arms and burst into a passion of tears.

Mrs. Redcliffe, white to the roots of her hair, soothed her

as well as she was able, sinking into a chair, for she was hardly able to stand.

"Oh, how hateful!" cried the girl. "Mother, we must go away. We can't stay here to have these things said against us."

"No, we will not go away," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "No one will behave like that again. The worst is over; but oh, it was very hard to bear."

They grew calmer, comforting one another, and presently went about their duties in the pleasant house which had been such a happy home to them for the past five years, but had now become a place from which they would both willingly have flown if they could have done so without cowardice.

And Mrs. Prentice walked homewards, her knees trembling under her, alternately exulting and afraid.

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. PRENTICE TASTES SUCCESS

Mrs. Prentice possessed, although she did not often allow it to appear, a wholesome dread of her husband. The Vicar, underneath the crust of his rigid beliefs, was an easy-going man, and had solved the problem of living in a not altogether ideal companionship by allowing his wife more room in which to exercise her less agreeable characteristics than was good for her. But he had at the bottom of his heart a solid lump of fundamental Christianity, and was sometimes shaken out of his wonted tolerance towards her, to express himself forcibly on her crying lack of charity. Now it would not be possible for any one to follow as doggedly as Mrs. Prentice did the letter of religion, and to escape altogether the calls of the spirit, unless actuated by the most deadly hypocrisy; and Mrs. Prentice was not a conscious hypocrite. Therefore there was something in her which her husband's occasional rebukes could affect. You may call it conscience or only vanity, but the fact remains that they caused her discomfort enough to make her dislike and dread them.

As she walked down to the village from the White House, convinced as she was that she had acted only uprightly, and had received abominable treatment for righteousness' sake, she was yet aware that whatever story she told her husband of what had passed between her and the Redcliffes, he would look at her, his face growing stern, amazed, indignant, and then he would break out upon her and rout her self-complacency, driving her out of the room in angry tears, perhaps, as had happened before. And, although she had done her duty—much as it had pained her—she knew that she would not be able to stand up against his wrath.

Really, at the present moment she could not go through with it. Her knees knocked under her and she felt faint and unstrung—though still conscious of rectitude. She could hardly summon up enough fortitude to carry her over the short mile which lay between the White House and the vicarage, with the populous village in between.

A recreating thought came to her. She would call at the Abbey on her way home and see Lady Wrotham. She would tell her patroness of what she had said and of what had been said to her. She must certainly put matters on a footing there some time, and if she did it before she saw her husband, she might be fortified by the great lady's approval and alliance against her husband's displeasure. At any rate she would be offered a chair, and she badly wanted a chair at the moment.

She was admitted at once to Lady Wrotham's presence and tottered to a seat.

"Oh, Mrs. Prentice!" cried Lady Wrotham. "You are ill. Some brandy, Hooker, quickly!"

"If I might have a glass of port wine and a biscuit," said Mrs. Prentice faintly. "Brandy flies to my head."

"Oh, yes. Port wine and a biscuit, Hooker, quickly! Pray what is the matter, Mrs. Prentice? But do not talk. Tell me afterwards. Lean your head back. Wait, I will put a cushion behind you."

But Mrs. Prentice was already recovering, and the port wine which she sipped and the biscuits at which she nibbled soon completed the process. When she had put the empty glass back on to the tray beside her she was herself once more.

"I am sure you must be surprised at my coming in in this way, Lady Wrotham," she said. "And I am sure I did not mean to alarm you. I was just a little overwrought."

Lady Wrotham still looked alarmed. She was a different

being, motherly, solicitous, from the autocratic dame that Mrs. Prentice had hitherto had to deal with, and that lady experienced a sense of comfortable gratitude as she put down her glass and prepared to tell her story.

"The fact is," she said, "that I have just gone through a most trying half-hour and it has greatly upset me."

"I can see that," said Lady Wrotham. "Please tell me about it if you feel yourself able to do so."

"Quite able now, thank you," returned Mrs. Prentice. "I have been treated in the most outrageous way by Mrs. Redcliffe and her daughter. I could not have believed such unpleasantness as I have had to go through could have existed."

Lady Wrotham's face settled into a slightly harder expression. "I hope," she said, "that the unpleasantness has had nothing to do with the circumstances of Mrs. Redcliffe's marriage, of which I told you in confidence."

"Yes, it had. But, Lady Wrotham, pray do not blame me before you have heard what has passed. I assure you that I would never have said a word, not a single word, either to Mrs. Redcliffe or any one else, if I had not been attacked in the most unmannerly way by—by the girl—and in the open road, where *anybody* might have been passing and heard what happened."

"The girl! But how did she attack you?"

"She stopped me in the road, as I say, as I was going up the hill, and first of all charged me with cutting her, as she expressed it."

"Well, had you cut her?"

"Certainly not. But I confess that I should not have stopped to speak to her owing to what occurred yesterday. I was annoyed, I own, I think justly annoyed, and I did not feel inclined to take the trouble to hide it."

"What did occur yesterday?"

"I did not know, when Lord Wrotham announced his intention of going up to the Fisheries with Mr. Browne, that Mrs. and Miss Redcliffe were to be of the party."

"I did not know either," Lady Wrotham interrupted her grimly; "but from what you have told me, I am not surprised to hear it."

"Well, I confess I was surprised. I met them coming back through the park. Mr. Browne was driving them in his trap, with Mrs. Redcliffe sitting by him in front, and Lord Wrotham and the girl together on the back seat."

"That is where I should have expected them to be," interrupted Lady Wrotham again.

"I turned round to look at them as I passed, and the girl nudged Lord Wrotham rudely and burst out laughing at me, without the slightest attempt to conceal her rudeness."

"Pretty manners!" commented Lady Wrotham. "Did my son laugh too?"

"Oh, no. His lordship looked quite shocked at her behaviour. Well, there it was. You can hardly be surprised, Lady Wrotham, that I should not have felt inclined to be exactly friendly when I met her this morning."

"No. If you have made no mistake in her attitude to you, it was certainly, as you say, outrageous. But why should she behave like that to you? Why should she laugh?"

"I think it was pretty plain. She knew quite well that I knew she was trying to got hold of Lord Wrotham—if I may use the expression—and her laugh was evidently one of triumph over me. I have no doubt that she had said something about me to Lord Wrotham, and had some understanding with him on the subject."

"I can hardly understand a respectably brought up girl behaving in that way. Still, if you say so ——"

"Oh, that is nothing to what happened this morning. I assure you, Lady Wrotham, that I really thought once or

twice that she was about to offer me bodily violence. She so lost control of herself that nothing was too bad for her to say. She showed her essentially vulgar nature in a way that was positively shocking."

"Did she? Well, how was the subject of Mrs. Redcliffe's marriage introduced? Does the girl know of the circumstances?"

"To my surprise I found that she does. I can only suppose that Mrs. Redcliffe, seeing that it was bound to come out, told her, for I am pretty certain she knew nothing before."

"Well?"

"She stormed at me like a—like a tiger for—well, as far as I can remember, for I was so taken aback that I hardly knew exactly what she did say—for—for ——"

"For telling people her mother's story?"

"No, I had not done that. Pray believe me, Lady Wrotham, I had told my husband, but had not breathed a word to another soul—and I am sure he would not have done so."

"Well, then, for what?"

"For knowing it myself, I suppose. That is the only thing I can think of. She was so furious at my knowing it that she could hardly contain herself."

"But how did she know that you knew it, if you had told no one?"

"I can only suppose that Lord Wrotham had said something yesterday."

"Oh, no, he would not have done that."

"I do not mean, of course, that he told her, or Mrs. Redcliffe, in so many words, but he may have mentioned that you knew of them when you were in Australia. And they could put two and two together."

"That is quite possible. But how should they connect you with the matter?"

"I—I don't know. But Mrs. Redcliffe took it for granted that you had told me, and I did not contradict her."

"Was Mrs. Redcliffe with the girl when she spoke to you?"

"No. She came down the road immediately afterwards, and insisted upon my going into the house, where she immediately set upon me and tried her utmost to get me to say that I approved of the circumstances of her marriage. I could not and would not say it, Lady Wrotham. I do not approve of such so-called marriages, and nothing would induce me, not death or martyrdom, to contract one myself."

"She wanted you to hold your tongue, I suppose," said Lady Wrotham. "And I do not altogether wonder at it. If the circumstances of her marriage were not known before, she would naturally be annoyed at their becoming known. I cannot think that you have behaved altogether wisely in the matter, Mrs. Prentice. Something must have been said or done to connect you in her mind with what she very likely may have gathered that I know. You betrayed no reticence at all in alluding to the matter before my son yesterday. I must judge a little by that."

"Oh, Lady Wrotham," said Mrs. Prentice, almost in tears. "Indeed I have said nothing—nothing at all."

"Well, the cat is out of the bag now, at any rate, and perhaps it is useless to inquire further how it got out. Then what happened to put you in the state in which you came here?"

Mrs. Prentice hastened to get to safer ground. "Mrs. Redcliffe talked quietly at first," she said. "I will do her that justice. She did her best, as I say, to defend herself, but she could not move me. When she found that, she threw off the mask completely, and became as violent and abusive as her daughter had been all along. The girl insulted me most grossly, and she made no attempt to stop her, except at

first. She denounced me as a wicked and irreligious woman —those were her very words—not for disclosing her secret, which she could not accuse me of, but for sticking to my convictions. I told her that whatever might be the case in Australia, marriage with a deceased wife's sister was not recognized either by the Church or by the law in this country."

"That was surely a little strong to a woman in her position."

"Oh, I did not put it in that way, of course. I tried to wrap it up as much as possible, consistently with keeping to my principles. But I assure you that neither she nor her daughter made the slightest attempt to wrap up anything that they saw fit to say to me. Any one would have thought that it was I who was in the equivocal position and not Mrs. Redcliffe. You could hardly believe the things that I was forced to listen to. It put me all of a tremble, as you saw. And it was not only me that was attacked. The girl, who was almost foaming at the mouth with anger and spite, shouted out after me, when at last I succeeded in getting away, a message to be given to you which I should not soil my lips by repeating."

"Oh, indeed! So I was brought into it, was I?"

"Most impertinently, Lady Wrotham. I should not think of offending you by repeating what was said."

"Nevertheless I should like to hear it. I could hardly be offended with you for whatever it was."

Mrs. Prentice hesitated. She had, in truth, forgotten exactly what it was that had been said, but made up for her lapse of memory by a liberal draft on her imagination.

"I was to tell you," she said, "that you were no better than I was."

"That is pleasant hearing," said Lady Wrotham, unconscious of irony. "Was there anything else?"

"Oh, yes. More impertinence, but I cannot remember the exact words. I was too anxious to get away, as I felt I could not go through any more, but it was to the effect that neither she—Miss Redcliffe—nor her mother wished to have anything to do with you. You must forgive me for repeating it."

"Oh, certainly. And I shall try to oblige them. Well, of course, I can feel to a certain extent for a woman in Mrs. Redcliffe's circumstances, but she seems to have behaved with great lack of dignity, to say the least of it, and whatever sympathy one might have felt if she had behaved herself, is largely done away with by what you tell me. I make nothing, of course, of the rudeness to me, personally. I shall not think twice about it."

"And the rudeness of both of them to me," said Mrs. Prentice, "was past all bearing. I am not a nervous woman, but you saw, Lady Wrotham, the state I was in when I came here, and, upon my word, I don't think I could have walked another step."

"No, I don't think you could. Did Mrs. Redcliffe herself charge you with any kind messages to me, or was it only the girl?"

"Mrs. Redcliffe did say something. But I cannot remember what it was."

"You need not be afraid of telling me what it was. I shall try to bear it."

"She said—no, I cannot remember. By that time I was so flustered that—but she certainly made no attempt to restrain the girl in her impudence. She more or less backed her up in what she said."

"Well, it is all very painful. But, at any rate, you have done no wrong, Mrs. Prentice. You may be quite at ease about that. You rebuked the girl I suppose for what she said—about me, I mean—not that it matters, of course."

"Indeed I did, Lady Wrotham. I was most indignant.

Just as much on your behalf as on my own. It is only your kindness that has enabled me to get over the scene. I shall hope never to have to go through such another."

"I hope you never may. If you have lost a friend in Mrs. Redcliffe, you have gained one in me. I hope the exchange will not be altogether to your disadvantage."

Mrs. Prentice wriggled with amiability and gratitude, but found no coherent words to express her sense of obligation.

"We must work together for the good of the people here," pursued Lady Wrotham. "I am sure you will support me in my efforts to enlighten them. I don't wish you to go against your husband, Mrs. Prentice. I need scarcely say that. At the same time, I am determined to oppose him where I think he is wrong, and I would rather have you on my side than as an enemy."

Mrs. Prentice shuddered at the thought of being at enmity with Lady Wrotham—especially now that she was getting on so well. She waited for further enlightenment as to how she was expected to be on Lady Wrotham's side in opposing her husband, without going against him.

"You could do so much," pursued her ladyship, "to get him to see these things in the proper light. A wife can always do so much. It would be a grievous thing for me to have to complain to the bishop about what has been going on here, and I do not wish to do so, although I told him I would, until all other means have been tried. I cannot think that you will not do all that you can."

Mrs. Prentice swallowed the dose. "I will," she said. "Perhaps it is true that we have been going too fast."

"The mistake does not lie in going too fast along the path to Rome, Mrs. Prentice, but in going at all. You do not see as clearly yet as I should like. I don't suppose it is your fault. Of course there *is* religion, a measure of true religion, even mixed up with the errors of the High Church party. I

am a broad-minded woman, and I have never denied it, as some do. And perhaps that is the only religion you have had an opportunity of learning. I do not blame you. But oh, my dear Mrs. Prentice, if you only knew the comfort and satisfaction to be got out of the purer, simpler form of belief! It has upheld me in many trials and many dark hours. I can speak from plentiful experience. I would not be without my simple faith, were it ever so. I have proved it. Let me give you some papers, and a little book. I do not wish to proselytize, but I do wish to turn those whose minds are open to good influences from the wrong path into the right one. You cannot refuse to test the question. I do not ask more. Read with an open, prayerful mind, and I have no doubt that you will see your way."

Lady Wrotham took a small cloth-bound book and a few selected tracts from a pile of religious ammunition that lay ready at her elbow, and pressed them on her visitor. Mrs. Prentice was honestly moved by her appeal. Perhaps there might be something in it after all. Her grazed spirit craved for comfort; and when a lady of such high birth was not afraid to take what presented itself to her as the unpopular side, she herself would probably not lose much if she came to be convinced that she had hitherto been on the wrong tack.

"Thank you very much for your kind interest in me, Lady Wrotham," she said gratefully. "I will certainly think over the question most carefully. It is true that I have been brought up as a Churchwoman with rather high views, but I am not infallible, and my views may have been mistaken."

"I think you will find that it is so," said Lady Wrotham. "I am sure you will, if you do not shut up your mind against the truth. I will pray for you, and the prayers of an old woman who perhaps has not very long to live, and must sooner or later stand before her Maker, even though stripped

of whatever advantages her position may have given her in this world, may be worth having. One can never tell."

Mrs. Prentice murmured something to the effect that Lady Wrotham's petitions must undoubtedly carry considerable weight, and took her leave, hugging her bundle of literature. As she walked away from the Abbey she found herself in a far more equable frame of mind than she had been when she arrived there, and felt genuinely grateful to Lady Wrotham for her share in bringing about this improvement. She was quite honestly ready to find some sort of hitherto unexpected magic in militant Protestantism, and experienced a pleasant glow in anticipating her own possible conversion to that form of belief. She was determined, at all events, to look into it with what she called an open mind, and congratulated herself not a little upon a heart so unbound by prejudice as to be ready to follow the call of the spirit—at all costs.

Well, she had put a spoke in Mrs. Redcliffe's wheel. That lady would perhaps be sorry that she had not addressed her with rather more deference when she came to think over it, and found that by her own action she had cut herself off from the sweets of such high society as were now being enjoyed in Exton. It was true that Lady Wrotham, by her kindness and advocacy of Mrs. Prentice's cause, had withdrawn most of the sting left by the memory of what had passed at the White House. Perhaps it might now be possible to enjoy the superiority that would be gained by applying the spirit of forgiveness and pity to Mrs. Redcliffe. That spirit would certainly stand her in good stead in the coming interview with her husband. But no. There was too much at stake. Though the sting had been drawn most of the irritation still remained. Mrs. Redcliffe must be brought low and kept low. Virtuous indignation was still the card to play, and if she had to play it against her husband as well as against Mrs. Redcliffe, the partnership of herself and Lady Wrotham in the

game would still be strong enough to make the victory assured.

Such, in rough paraphrase, were the thoughts that passed through Mrs. Prentice's mind as she made her way homewards, though not perhaps in a form that she would either have accepted or recognized. She sought her husband the moment she got into the house, judging that it would be better to go through her ordeal at once rather than wait until the wine of Lady Wrotham's approval had less power to buoy her up.

"William," she said, "I dare say you will blame me, but I cannot help it. I feel that I have acted rightly, and that must sustain me."

The Vicar looked at her quizzically, marking the book and papers she held in her hand. "I hope it will," he said. "It is well to have the support of one's own conscience. I suppose you have undertaken to help Lady Wrotham in her endeavours to upset my influence here?"

"Indeed, I have done nothing of the sort," said Mrs. Prentice indignantly. "Though I am not at all sure that you are not doing Lady Wrotham an injustice in your mind. She is at heart a truly religious woman, though she does not believe in all the excrescences that have grown up round the Christian Faith."

"Oh, it has come to that, has it?" remarked the Vicar dryly. "The doctrines and practices which the Church has taught since the earliest times are excrescences. I should like to have seen your face, Agatha, if any one had ventured to make that assertion a week ago."

"You may sneer at me if you like, William, though I think sneers are hardly becoming to a Christian. But even you will hardly deny that the tree is known by its fruit, and that ——"

"No, I do not deny that," interrupted the Vicar. "If you

can show better fruit by forsaking the beliefs which you have held, perhaps even more strongly than I, and going over to those which Lady Wrotham holds, by all means do so. If that is what you have to tell me I would rather not say anything more about it—at present," and he made as if to return to his writing.

"That is not what I have to tell you," said Mrs. Prentice, laying down her papers on the table at her elbow. "It is about this unfortunate discovery that has been made about Mrs. Redcliffe. Lady Wrotham agrees with me that it cannot possibly go on."

The Vicar's calm and somewhat contemptuous attitude disappeared. His face became dark. "What cannot possibly go on?" he asked impatiently. "Have you and Lady Wrotham been consulting together as to how that poor lady's life can be made a burden to her, now that her secret has been wormed out? A pretty display of the Christian spirit that you talk about, upon my word!"

"Really, William, you are very foolish. And why you should constitute yourself Mrs. Redcliffe's champion when she has certainly broken a law that you profess to believe in, and get angry whenever her name is mentioned, passes my comprehension."

"Does it? Then I can't say much for your comprehension. Here is a woman with whom we have lived for the last five years on terms of intimate friendship. She is a woman of the most admirable character, and her life here has been a lesson to all of us. The more one knows her the more one finds to respect and admire. There is no one of whom I have a higher opinion. She has been a real help in everything that we try to do here for the good of the people; and now ——"

"I don't agree with you in that," interrupted Mrs. Prentice. "She is not a good Churchwoman—naturally, she

couldn't be, under the circumstances—and it was only the other day that she went directly against your teaching in the proper observance of Lent."

"One of the things that I thought Lady Wrotham had persuaded you to regard as excrescences. You know perfectly well that Lady Wrotham, with her peculiar views, would laugh at the idea of not asking her friends to dine with her on any day in the year she felt inclined; and I very much doubt whether you would have the slightest hesitation in dining with her if she asked you. It won't do, Agatha. Your attitude to Mrs. Redcliffe is *not* dictated by the disinterested love of righteousness that you are hugging yourself over, but by a very unworthy feeling indeed. I never inquired exactly what passed between you and her when you took it upon yourself to remonstrate with her about her doings the other day, but I have no doubt you received the rebuke you deserved, and now that another weapon has been put into your hands against her you are only too ready to use it. It causes me the deepest distress to see how you are behaving in this matter."

"Really, William, I have no patience with you," exclaimed Mrs. Prentice. "You lecture me as if I were a malefactor, and you know nothing whatever of what has happened. You won't let me get in a word edgeways, and are altogether most violent and unreasonable."

"Well, what has happened? I suppose you will hardly have gone to Mrs. Redcliffe and lectured her about this new cause of offence, as you did about the old?"

"No, I have not. It was Mrs. Redcliffe herself, who insisted upon speaking to me about it, though I had no sort of wish to do so, or indeed to speak to her about anything."

"Then you have seen Mrs. Redcliffe! Well, I suppose it is of no use to be impatient. The harm, whatever it is, has been done, and I had better hear the worst at once, and then see if I can undo some of it."

"I shall tell you nothing," said Mrs. Prentice, outraged, "if you talk to me in that tone. It is monstrous. You take it for granted that whatever I do must be wrong, and put down to me the most shocking motives, when I have only tried to do what is right, and when, as I say, you have heard nothing of what has happened."

"I am waiting to hear what has happened."

"Then I will tell you. But I will not listen to any more abuse, and I tell you so candidly, William."

The Vicar made no reply, and Mrs. Prentice began her story. She opened in much the same way as she had done to Lady Wrotham, but her husband saw more clearly what lay behind her statement than that lady had done.

"Hilda is young and impulsive," he said, "but she would never have approached you in that way if there had not been some cause. I suppose the fact is that you had shown her and her mother so clearly that you disapproved of them and wished to have nothing more to do with them, although you had actually said nothing, that the girl took offence, and naturally wanted to know why you should have treated them in that way."

This was so clearly the fact, that Mrs. Prentice could not deny it. She could only say that it was not to be expected that she should treat Mrs. Redcliffe, under the circumstances that had arisen, exactly as she had done before.

"You had no right to do anything else," said the Vicar, "unless you were determined to spread her story. The truth is that you took the very means to bring about what happened. You must have known, if you had thought about it, that Mrs. Redcliffe, or Hilda on her behalf, would sooner or later ask you the reason of your change of attitude, and I'm afraid that I don't find it very difficult to believe that you had acted towards them in such a way as to make a high-spirited girl like Hilda put the question in such a way as to show her resentment."

"No, of course you don't find it difficult to believe anything disagreeable about your wife," said Mrs. Prentice acidly. "As a matter of fact there was something that had nothing to do with Mrs. Redcliffe's story which would have caused me to be very careful not to have anything more to do than I could help with the girl." She then recounted her meeting with the party in Browne's cart the day before.

"I don't believe it," said the Vicar. "If she laughed it was not at you. She is not an ill-mannered girl. And what on earth has it to do with you if Lord Wrotham likes to make friends with the Redcliffes? You seem to want to keep the Wrothams as your own special property. You will make yourself very ridiculous about the place if you give occasion for that to be said against you."

Mrs. Prentice was beginning to be borne down by the weight of her husband's displeasure. It was of no use to repeat her threat of leaving him unadvised of what had taken place. He would only have told her impatiently to go on with her story, and she would not have been able to disobey him. She put aside his warning with a high word, and proceeded with her narrative, laying great stress on Hilda's outrageous violence, as she called it, and on Mrs. Redcliffe's denunciating of her, but very little on the quieter passages of the interview, and forgetting altogether to mention the extenuating circumstances that Mrs. Redcliffe had urged against the strictest view of her marriage.

"It makes a very pretty story," said the Vicar when she had finished, "but if you ask me to believe that Mrs. Redcliffe spoke to you in that way without receiving a great deal more provocation than you have admitted, I must decline to do so. I dare say the story was good enough for Lady Wrotham, who does not know her, but it is not good enough for me. There is another side to it."

Mrs. Prentice rose. "I shall say no more," she said. "It

is useless. You seem to be infatuated with Mrs. Redcliffe. Since you decline to believe a word that I say, you had better go and get the truth from her."

"That is just what I intend to do," replied her husband. "I would give a great deal not to have to speak to her about it; but now that all this has been let loose upon the poor lady, it is for her own advantage that I shall do so."

Mrs. Prentice bethought herself. It would not be well that her husband should be able to accuse her of keeping anything back from him. "I dare say she will make out a very good story for herself," she said. "If you prefer to believe her rather than your wife, you must do so; and you are always soft where women are concerned—except me, and there you are as hard as stone. Of course there is the principle of the thing, but that won't weigh with you for a moment."

The Vicar laughed grimly. "You are talking very foolishly," he said. "But as I have spoken pretty strongly to you, I suppose it is only fair that I should listen to your accusations without resentment. I certainly don't resent them; they are too silly."

"Thank you," returned Mrs. Prentice. "That is so like a man. I was going to tell you that Mrs. Redcliffe *says* that she didn't know that marriage with a deceased wife's sister was not quite a usual and praiseworthy custom until she came to England. It is a good deal to swallow, but I dare say you will have no difficulty in swallowing it."

"I shall have no difficulty in swallowing any direct statement that Mrs. Redcliffe makes," returned the Vicar. "If that is so it makes the poor lady's case a hard one. Well, they say that women are cruel to one another, Agatha, but, really, one finds it difficult to believe that a woman who has known another woman, as you have known Mrs. Redcliffe, should find it in her heart to behave as you are doing towards

her. I will say no more than that until I have seen her, which I will do this afternoon."

Mrs. Prentice left the room. The interview had ended quietly and with far less tribulation to the spirit than she had anticipated. But it did occur to her once or twice later that her husband had not yet said all that he was likely to say on the subject, and she was not altogether at her ease. She spent the afternoon in her room reading what Lady Wrotham had asked her to read. The tracts prepared by the Ladies' Reformation League for the strengthening of their anti-ritual campaign left her cold, and had indeed been unwisely chosen for the purpose which Lady Wrotham had had in mind, but the book, which was written by an Evangelical dean, and contained no controversial rancour, comforted her considerably. The chief lesson she drew from it was that those who acted rightly regardless of consequences were in an exceptionally enviable condition, and the application to her own case was so impossible not to make that the truth of the general Evangelical attitude commended itself to her agreeably, and she felt that she and Lady Wrotham had more in common than she had hitherto suspected.

CHAPTER XVII

THE VICAR

The Vicar walked up to the White House that afternoon considerably disturbed in mind. The matter immediately in hand was not chiefly responsible for his discomfort. He disliked the idea of talking to Mrs. Redcliffe of her most intimate affairs, but his feeling towards her was so firmly anchored in respect, and his desire now so strong to help her, that he could be in no doubt as to the ultimate outcome of this visit.

There were other things to try him. Difficulties seemed to be gathering round him. The autocratic, narrow-minded old woman, who had come apparently determined to impose her views on all about her, and to destroy the peace of mind of a fairly contented community—how would her actions affect him in his work and in his life? Disastrously, he feared. And if, added to her opposition in Church matters, she was such a woman as to be ready to persecute Mrs. Redcliffe, whom she had never met, for the mistake—as he judged it—of her past life, she would in truth be a stumbling-block in the way of all peace and goodness. He had had some further conversation, couched in more mutually tolerant form than before, with his wife over the luncheon table, with a view of extracting from her what had passed between herself and Lady Wrotham; and what he had learnt, although he discounted a good deal of it, distressed him. His wife, with such an ally, would exhibit all her worst points, and find herself encouraged in that merciless self-sufficiency and aptitude for strife which he had told her more than once or twice,

with the frankness engendered of the married state, was her besetting sin. This was not a state of things that could be looked forward to with complacency, and if, besides this, she was really about to stultify all her previous beliefs and championships and follow the lead of Lady Wrotham in her opposition to himself, would not life with her become intolerable?

Curiously, perhaps, when he had got to the stage of asking himself this question, he did not find the reply to it to be altogether discouraging. He knew his wife so well. Displeased though he was with her at the present moment, he felt little of that indignant anger which only an adversary whom we are doubtful of subduing can arouse in our minds. She was undoubtedly tiresome in many ways; her faults, when they were pushed to extremes, distressed and even scandalized him; she was not always easy to live with. But she was Agatha, his wife of five and twenty years. He had grown used to her. Virtues, little apparent to the outside world, but known to him, tempered her naughtiness of heart, and coloured his judgment. And in the long run he knew that he could have his way with her. At the same time there would be serious difficulties and annoyances to overcome before she would be finally in subjection, and he would not spare the rod of his displeasure when she deserved it.

These musings brought him to the gate of the White House, and he shook them off to bend his mind to the task that lay immediately before him.

Hilda was at work among the rose-bushes in the garden, and came forward to meet him as he walked up the drive. Her attitude was uncompromising, and she neither smiled nor offered her hand.

"Mother is lying down," she said. "Naturally, she is not well after what happened this morning, and I don't think she will be able to see you."

"I am very sorry to hear that," he said. "But aren't you going to shake hands with me, Hilda?"

She looked him straight in the face. "I think I would rather not," she said, "until I know what you think, or have to say, about what you have probably heard of. And I will never take Mrs. Prentice's hand again as long as I live."

There was a flame of the old resentment in her face which saddened him. "My dear," he said, "I know that there were regrettable things said this morning. I have come up to see if I can do something to take away the effect of them. You must not treat an old friend as if he were an enemy, certainly not before you have heard what he has to say for himself."

The antagonism in her face died down, but she did not move. "I don't know who are friends and who are enemies now," she said. "I only know that my dear mother, who is the best woman in the world, is in trouble, and because she is in trouble those who ought to be her friends and value her as she deserves hate her."

"I hope you will find very soon that that is not so, Hilda. And here is one friend who does value your mother as she deserves, and would like to assure her of it."

"I am glad you have said that," she said, softening a little. "It is no more than you ought to say. But how can we go on being friends with you, Mr. Prentice, after what has happened? I said things to Mrs. Prentice this morning that you would be shocked to hear. But I meant them every word, and I would say them again."

They were standing on the gravel near the house. Mrs. Redcliffe, whose bedroom windows were at this corner, had heard their voices and hastened to come down. She now appeared at the door.

"Come in, if you please, Mr. Prentice," she said, and led the way to the parlour. Hilda closed the door, and again

there were three of them closeted together, and distressing things to be said.

But the Vicar hastened to relieve the tension. "Mrs. Redcliffe," he said, "I have heard everything that happened this morning, and I am sure you will not want to discuss it with me. I will only say this—that I am deeply sorry that my wife should have acted as she did. More than that you will not expect me to say. But I want you to consider if you will that I am not only your friend of some years' standing. If it were only that perhaps I could not come here apart from my wife, after what has happened, until —— Well, at all events, I *have* come, because I am the clergyman of this parish, as well as your friend, and you have a right to my help and advice, if you care to make use of it."

"Thank you, Mr. Prentice," replied Mrs. Redcliffe. "But I do not feel now that I want help or advice. Things became plainer to me this morning, and I see that there is nothing to be done, except to go on living my life as I have been doing, keeping such friendships as are still open to me, and doing without those that are withdrawn. Even from the point of view of the Pharisee, there is nothing to be done. There is no advice to be given or taken."

"Mrs. Prentice advised you to repent, mother," said Hilda, her young voice full of scorn.

The Vicar grew red. "May we not put aside for the present what Mrs. Prentice said?" he asked.

"Yes, I wish to do so," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "And I do recognize the friendliness of your action in coming here, Mr. Prentice. It is what I should have expected of you. Perhaps, under the circumstances, we cannot go on seeing so much of each other as we have done in the past, but our friendship, I believe, is founded on what we know of each other. That is sure ground, and even now, though you may feel—I don't know—

that what you have heard alters your opinion of me in some degree, still there may be kindly feeling between us."

"What I have heard does not alter my opinion of you, Mrs. Redcliffe," said the Vicar. "How could it?"

"Well," she said, "I know what the views of Churchmen are on this question. I have read them when it has come up, and I have even heard them preached about. I have heard you preach on the subject, Mr. Prentice."

The Vicar grew red. He remembered, though he had previously forgotten, that on one of the occasions on which a Deceased Wife's Sister Bill had been before Parliament he had delivered himself in the pulpit of Exton Abbey of a collection of the usual clerical objections to it.

"If I had known ——" he began.

"I know you would not willingly have hurt me," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "You needn't tell me that. And I don't know that you did hurt me. You were simply expressing views that I was quite familiar with, and I should have expected you to hold them. I do not expect you to alter them because of me."

"I think they are very narrow-minded views," said Hilda uncompromisingly. "But if Mr. Prentice holds them I suppose he is bound to be like Mrs. Prentice, and look upon us as people he can't possibly associate with."

"You are quite wrong, Hilda," said the Vicar. "To act in that way would not even be the logical outcome of my views. I must be honest with you, Mrs. Redcliffe. I should resist, as far as I had any power, any new legislation on the subject, and—I am not quite sure, I have not thought the matter out—I think I should not become intimate with—with a couple, an English couple, who had gone through the ceremony abroad, and were living in my parish. But your case is very different. Even if you had not married, as my wife told me was the case, in ignorance of the Church's rule,

you—it would be wrong, un-Christian to—to—I don't know how to put it—it would amount to taking it upon one's self to ostracize you for what cannot now be altered, even if you wished to have it altered, and to holding one's self aloof from one from whom one has only been helped and encouraged in every good work."

"Then you do not insist upon mother's repenting before you can treat her as worthy to live at all?" asked Hilda, unsoftened by his tribute.

The Vicar was silent. If the case had been submitted to him on paper, he would certainly have decreed that repentance must precede a complete forgiveness of the offence to the Church's law, even though that offence were committed in innocence. But the deceased wife's sister had projected herself from an impersonal ecclesiastical bogie into the form of Mrs. Redcliffe, charitable, high-minded, calm in judgment, untiring in good works, a woman whom it was a privilege to know, and an inspiration to all patient goodness to count as a friend. Do circumstances alter cases? Surely, in this case of a woman so patently producing the fruits of righteousness, it was impossible to judge of her as living apart from grace—in a state of sin!

"I don't say that; I say nothing more than I have said," he replied after a short pause, during which these thoughts had passed through his mind.

But the pause had been too long for Hilda. She made a movement of impatience. "The idea," she exclaimed, indignantly, "of saying such a thing about my mother! You know how good she is, and her goodness seems to go for nothing beside a stupid law that ought never to have been made."

"Do not speak in that way, Hilda," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "Mr. Prentice has said just what I could have wished him to say, and said it with true kindness."

"He has said pretty well what Mrs. Prentice said," replied Hilda. "Only she wanted to say yes, and he would have liked to say no if he could. I am not satisfied, mother, if you are. You are too good and patient. I cannot listen to any more. It makes me angry to think that any good man or woman should not take your side as a matter of course, without weighing this or that. I shall go now, and if you can make Mr. Prentice see what harm he is doing to himself and his religion by putting rules before goodness it will be all the better for him." And she left the room with her head in the air.

"It has been a great blow to her," said Mrs. Redcliffe, when the door had closed behind Hilda. "It has upset all her standards; and the way it will affect her causes me more distress than anything else. You must forgive her if she speaks harshly. Youth always takes a harsh view when its affections are wounded."

"Oh, indeed, I honour her for her championship," said the Vicar. "And I do not feel that her blame is undeserved. It is a terrible thing, as she says, to prefer rules to goodness. But, my dear friend, it is not easy to adjust one's thoughts to a disturbance of belief. If I were to throw over at once and completely all I had held and taught on the subject, it might satisfy Hilda for the moment, but it would not satisfy you. There is no real antagonism between my views on the general question and my continued respect for you personally, and, if I appear to hesitate over answering any particular question, it is only because I must make clear to my own mind where truth and the right lies."

"I know," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "I do not misunderstand you. You have lifted a weight from my mind, for I must tell you, that although I do not resent the views held by the more strict of your Church, my own marriage has taught me that they are wrong. To do what I did cannot be a sin, for

a sin, committed and persisted in, must cut you off from God, and my marriage while it lasted, and the memory of it ever since, has only brought me nearer to Him. That is as deeply my experience as any lesson the years can teach us about the pursuit of righteousness. Perhaps it is too much to ask that you should accept my experience as if it were your own, but to treat me now as one who has something on her conscience that unfits her to live amongst professing Christians, is an offence that I cannot lightly ignore. I did not think that you could commit it, and you have not."

"My wife, I am afraid, has done so," returned the Vicar ruefully. "I am very sorry for it. But, Mrs. Redcliffe, you will not judge her harshly. You know what her faults are. But she is good at heart. She will be sorry herself for what she has said and done—and I hope before very long."

He made this appeal with the full belief that it would be responded to. He knew Mrs. Redcliffe as a woman more than others ready to make allowances. He had heard her put in a quiet word of excuse for some one palpably in the wrong many times. He had never in all his experiences of her heard her impute blame to a single living creature. And he had known her make ample allowances for his wife, who, without such allowances, would have made mischief before this between the vicarage and the White House, for she had always been jealous of Mrs. Redcliffe and her placid influence.

But there was to be no further exoneration from clear obliquity of purpose. Mrs. Redcliffe's face grew sterner. "I think," she said, "that there *are* sins which no one can commit and expect their neighbours to live with them as before. And I think Mrs. Prentice has committed one of them. What Hilda said is true. She wanted, as earnestly as she could want anything, to find wickedness in me, and she used the opinions she had acquired on this question as an excuse, and not as a reason for finding me guilty. I do regard such an at-

titude as a sin against the light, and I should say the same—that is the test of whether my own attitude to her now is not dictated by resentment—I should say the same if it were another woman towards whom I knew she felt as she does to me, and I were not directly concerned. I would have nothing to do with one woman who persecuted another with those motives."

The Vicar was at a loss. Her rigidity surprised and disconcerted him.

"I know how deeply she must have offended you," he said, "for you to speak like that."

"She did offend me—deeply. But she has offended me before and I have made light of it. I cannot do so now. If it were only for Hilda's sake, I must be known to abhor the spirit she has shown. There is no good in it, only malice and evil. And with one woman to another, to whom she should have shown—perhaps pity, though I do not want pity, but certainly kindness and sympathy, for I told her everything. No, there is no excuse. She is jubilant at what she has discovered about me, and if trouble comes of it to me and to Hilda, it is to her I shall owe it."

The Vicar had nothing to say. He recognized the truth of Mrs. Redcliffe's accusation, all the more forceful as coming from her. A feeling of deep anger, such as he had never felt against her before, held him as he thought of his wife, an echo of the impersonal anger that Mrs. Redcliffe had expressed against the wrong-doer, stronger than it was in her to feel on account of the wrong done to her. The world must go awry, and the claims of religion be brought into contempt, if such a spirit were to be allowed to walk abroad unlaid.

"I am afraid that you have justification for what you say," he replied. "I shall not shrink from my duty in rebuking the fault. But no fault—no sin—is beyond forgiveness. You will not shut your heart against her when she comes to see that she has been wrong?"

"When I know that she comes to see it—when she tells me so unreservedly—I will wipe it out of my mind. The offence against me shall be as nothing. But until that time comes there will be no drawing back, Mr. Prentice. My displeasure against her will be as strong as hers against me, and I shall not hesitate to express it where I see the necessity."

There was no more to say. The Vicar left her and walked back to his house sad at heart. He had been impressed by Mrs. Redcliffe's calm, sensible view of her own position, her views of what was due to herself from the world and of what was due from herself to the prejudices of the world. He always expected Mrs. Redcliffe to be sensible, sensible almost with inspiration, and he had even been willing in some respects to accept her view as against his own, at any rate as far as her case was concerned. But he would never have seen deeper than the surface—more than the unfortunate falling out of two women, both of whom had something to say in their own excuse, although the one more than the other, if it had not been for the quite unsuspected capacity for uncompromising wrath that Mrs. Redcliffe had displayed. Here was no angry sense of injustice that could be soothed by a lightly spoken word of sympathy. It came welling out of the woman's heart, fortified by all her experience of goodness and all the self-disciplined motives of her life. It burned with a spiritual flame. Woe betide him if he did not guide his course by its heat. Yes, the girl was right. This was a transparently good woman, and those who were not for her in the crisis of her life were ranging themselves on the side of evil. He, at any rate, would from henceforward be on her side, and he would fight for her even against his nearest.

The interview which he immediately sought with his wife need not be reported in detail. He spoke as strongly as he felt, and Mrs. Prentice was ultimately brought to tears. But they were not the tears of penitence, but of revolt. The fact

that her original dislike of Mrs. Redcliffe arose from the feeling that she was a better woman than herself, and was recognized as such, did not dispose her to softness when she heard Mrs. Redcliffe extolled as a saint and herself condemned as a sinner by her own husband. Her mind was honestly unable to grasp that a woman who had married her deceased sister's husband might move on a higher plane of conduct than one who had escaped that temptation, and a good deal of the Vicar's diatribe she rejected indignantly, thereby supporting in comparative comfort those parts of it which would otherwise have found their way to her conscience.

"It is you who are un-Christian," she cried out at length, furious with anger and jealousy. "Lady Wrotham is quite right. You are not fit to be in your present position. And I shall tell her I think so."

And that was all that the Vicar got for the present by his championship of Mrs. Redcliffe.

CHAPTER XVIII

TURNER AND BROWNE TAKE SIDES

Browne, in pursuance of his promise to Lady Wrotham, presented himself at the Fisheries that same afternoon, and found Captain Thomas Turner seated in front of his fire, deep in the perusal of a new novel from a box that had just reached him.

"Well, you're a nice fellow," he said. "Fancy frousting indoors over a book at this time of day!"

Turner looked slightly apologetic. "Been out all the morning and afternoon," he said, "and it's infernally chilly. Don't mean to go out again."

"Oh, yes, you do," returned Browne. "You've got to drive down to the Abbey and call on her ladyship with me."

"That's the last thing I intend to do. Stop and have some tea. I'm ready for a little company. You can sit down and read a book—plenty of good ones here—or we'll have a game of picquet, which ever you like."

"Look here, Turner," said Browne earnestly. "Do come down. She expects you, and it'll make it infernally hard for me if you don't."

Turner bent a look of demure consideration on him. "Poor devil!" he said slowly. "Poor, poor devil!"

"What do you mean?" asked Browne.

"You're a parasite, Browne, a blooming old parasite."

"I'm nothing of the sort," said Browne indignantly. "I'm out in the open air all day long, and as healthy a fellow as you'll see anywhere."

"You follow one of the parasitical occupations. You're not your own master. You've got to kow-tow to an old

woman if you want to keep your place. I wouldn't be you for anything in the world. Give me freedom; freedom with a crust if you like, but still freedom."

"There's nothing to be said against working for other people. You had to obey orders yourself when you were in the Service. You're talking rot. I'm as free as you are."

"Well, then, go and lap up your milk out of the old lady's saucer, if you like it, and leave me to myself."

"I shall take it as devilish unfriendly if you don't come, Turner. Hang it, the old lady only wants to be civil to you. She's a newcomer here—that's what she says herself—and the ladies in the place will call on her, as if she was anybody else. That's what she wants, only she says that bachelors are rather different, and asked me to bring you to see her, and I said I'd bring you to-day. It's me you're putting a slight on if you don't come, not her. Well, it'll be her too, for I shall have to give her some reasons."

"If you put it in that way, Maximilian, I don't know that I can refuse you. Only I tell you this, I shan't kow-tow to her. I'm as good as she is, for although my father kept a shop—a d——d big shop, or I shouldn't be where I am—I don't want anything of anybody; and you can't get higher than that."

"She won't want you to kow-tow to her. She's a nice, friendly old lady. Well, come along. It's nearly half-past four."

"I must change my clothes first. I'm not a parasite, but I know what's due to a lady."

A quarter of an hour later they drove down through the wood together. They found Mrs. Prentice closeted with Lady Wrotham, and both ladies looked as if they had been discussing matters of import. Browne made the introduction, and Lady Wrotham threw off her preoccupation and gave Turner a pleasant welcome.

"How do you do, Mrs. Prentice?" said that gentleman when he had shaken hands with his hostess. "I hope we meet as friends."

"It is not my nature to bear enmity, Captain Turner," said Mrs. Prentice, shaking hands with him, unwilling to enter into a skirmish in front of Lady Wrotham.

"I believe my son went up to look at your fish yesterday, Captain Turner," said Lady Wrotham, as she poured out the tea. "He talks of making a hatchery himself, in Northumberland. I hope you did not encourage him. I know Lord Wrotham spent a lot on this place and found it unsatisfactory, though I hope you are doing better."

"I don't make much money," replied Turner, "but I pay my rent and I've got something to do. I didn't hold out hopes that more could be done with the business than that."

"I am glad to hear it. My son is full of energy, and always starting something fresh. Still, the hatching must be interesting to watch. Perhaps you will let me come and see it some day."

"I shall be pleased," replied Turner. "If you would kindly give me a day's notice I will see that everything is ship-shape."

This was not a very cordial invitation, and so Mrs. Prentice must have thought, for she broke in, "I am sure, Captain Turner, you will be *more* than delighted to show Lady Wrotham everything that there is to be seen."

"I don't know what being more than delighted means," replied Turner; "but I said I should be pleased."

Lady Wrotham threw a look at him. He was sitting upright on a stiff chair, his tea-cup in his hand and a savoury sandwich in his mouth. His face was expressionless. She tried him again.

"It is rather lonely, is it not," she asked, "living up in the woods by yourself?"

"I don't find it so," he replied. "I've got plenty to do in the day time, with my fishes and my flowers. I like gardening. And at night I read a book."

"Ah, of course, books are a great standby. One has the company of the greatest minds."

"I haven't. I only read novels. I read every novel that comes out."

"Dear me! But isn't that rather a waste of time?"

"Some people think it so. Mr. Browne does. He says if he read so many novels as I do his brain would run to seed. He'd hate that. I'm not afraid for myself, because I haven't got so large a brain as he has."

The unfortunate Browne swallowed a gulp of hot tea and subsequently choked, which prevented him from defending himself. Mrs. Prentice took a hand in the conversation.

"I do not object to novel-reading in moderation," she said; "but I like to have a good solid book going at the same time."

"Some of my novels are very solid," said Turner. "You'd be surprised to find how solid."

Lady Wrotham was again at a loss quite what to make of this strange, solemn person. "Of course you are not entirely cut off from your neighbours," she said. "You are not quite a hermit, Captain Turner?"

"Oh, no. I see a good deal of Mr. Browne. I'm ignorant, but he puts up with me. And I like Mrs. Redcliffe. She's very kind to us bachelors. We have little games of Bridge. And there's Mrs. O'Keefe, when she's here, and the Ferrabys —I've known Ferraby a good many years—and Mrs. Prentice's son, he's kind to me. And the Vicar; he's kind too, though he doesn't quite approve of me."

"I think I should not mention that if I were you, Captain Turner," said Mrs. Prentice stiffly, "or Lady Wrotham might feel inclined to ask you the reason for our disapproval."

"I'm sorry you join in the disapproval, Mrs. Prentice," Turner proceeded, in an even voice. "I was afraid it might be so. But if you think Lady Wrotham would like to know the reason, perhaps you will tell her."

Mrs. Prentice grew a dusky red. "I think your behaviour is not very seemly," she said. "I should not have expected you to talk here in the extraordinary and objectionable way you always do."

"It's his fun," cried Browne in an agonized voice. "It's only his fun."

"It is not my idea of fun," said Mrs. Prentice.

Turner addressed himself to Lady Wrotham, who still eyed him with a puzzled air. "I must confess," he said, "that Mr. Prentice has reason for his disapproval, as a clergyman who likes to see a large and happy congregation facing him. I very seldom make one of them."

"Oh, indeed," said Lady Wrotham.

"Naturally he doesn't like that," pursued Turner. "No clergyman would. I don't blame him."

"Perhaps you are too much occupied with your fish to allow you to attend divine service," suggested Lady Wrotham.

"Oh, no, it isn't that at all. I could come perfectly well if I liked."

Browne wiped his brow. "I don't fancy Lady Wrotham would be interested in your religious views, Turner," he said.

"Oh, but I am," she said. "I am interested in every one's religious views. Possibly the services as they have been conducted at the church are too ritualistic for you, Captain Turner."

Mrs. Prentice sniffed, but wished she had not done so when she found the eye of her patroness fixed upon her. "We have agreed, I think, Mrs. Prentice," said Lady Wrotham, "that it will be as well that changes should take place there."

"Oh, yes," said the unfortunate woman. "I certainly think it would be wiser."

Turner bent a reproachful look on her. "Why, I thought you were trying to persuade the Vicar to have incense," he said. "I thought you liked the smell;—and confessional boxes?"

"That is an absolute and unblushing falsehood," replied Mrs. Prentice angrily.

"I am not altogether surprised," said Lady Wrotham, ignoring this little passage of arms, "that there should be some who are inclined to keep away from public worship on account of the way it has been conducted. I intend to hold a weekly service here, Captain Turner, of Scripture reading and prayers and simple hymns. I shall be very pleased if you would care to be present. Mrs. Prentice and I have arranged the first meeting for next Wednesday at five o'clock."

Browne opened his eyes and stared at each of the ladies in turn. Lady Wrotham was serene, Mrs. Prentice apparently flustered.

"Thank you very much," said Turner; "but I hope you will excuse me."

Lady Wrotham looked at him. "There will certainly be no ritual on this occasion," she said.

"I like ritual," replied Turner. "It is not that. I don't care for religious services."

Lady Wrotham drew herself up. "Then in that case," she said, "I need say no more, except that I am sorry I misunderstood you."

"He—he reads sermons and things at home," said Browne desperately.

"No, never," said the inexorable Turner. "I read nothing but novels—except an occasional play by Shakespeare, and that only out of a sense of duty. I don't pretend to like it.

I don't want Lady Wrotham to have a wrong opinion of me. Hate sailing under false colours."

"You are not likely to do that, Captain Turner," said Mrs. Prentice. "Every one knows here that as far as religion goes you are an open scoffer."

"No, that's not so," said Turner. "I never scoff at religion. I may have something to say occasionally about the people who profess it."

Lady Wrotham's brow unbent. She had placed him now. He was no longer a gentleman living in a small way under the shadow of the castle, who had refused an invitation she had vouchsafed to him. He was a soul, a brand, a sinner, six lean feet of raw material sent to her to be manufactured into the finished article beloved of the Women's Reformation League. "I think it is honest of Captain Turner to confess his unbeliefs," she said. "I would rather that than a perfunctory observance which has no reality underneath it. Captain Turner, if you can spare half-an-hour from your novel-reading, will you oblige me by reading these?" and she pressed upon him a hurriedly selected packet of tracts.

"Thank you," said Turner, taking them. "I wouldn't think of saying no. But to tell you the honest truth, Lady Wrotham, I don't think they'll do me the slightest good. I was brought up on them, you know. It's rather like pouring champagne down a man's throat for medicine. If he's never drunk much it does him a world of good. If he's soaked with it you might just as well give him water."

Lady Wrotham did not quite like the illustration, but she was interested in her case. "You were brought up in a godly home?" she asked.

"Prayers night and morning, church twice and sometimes three times on a Sunday. Meetings—just like you are going to start here, 'cept that you're a lady of title and my father was a shopkeeper.

"Oh!" said Lady Wrotham, and Mrs. Prentice exclaimed —

"You never told us that piece of news before, Captain Turner."

"I thought you'd look down on me," replied Turner. "Rather snobbish of me, perhaps. But nobody wishes to be thought low."

"His father was a chemical manufacturer," put in Browne, perspiring at every pore. "I don't know why he should want to make himself out different to what he is. And he went to Eton, and into a good regiment."

"It's very kind of you, Browne, to try and soften it down," said Turner. "But there was a shop, I assure you. You could have bought a sixpenny tooth-brush over the counter. I'm very relieved to get it out. I've always felt that Mrs. Prentice would not have been so cordial to me if she had known it."

"Well, never mind the shop," said Lady Wrotham good-humouredly. She was beginning to place her case as an eccentric. "I should like to hear more about your religious upbringing, and why it has not affected your later life."

"Too much of it," said Turner. "My father was a very good man, but he didn't understand boys. We all had too much of it—there were three of us. We used to see who would make the best hand of labouring under a conviction of sin. You don't want to labour under a conviction of sin at twelve and thirteen. You want a swishing. My eldest brother succeeded to the business, and when my father died he went over to Rome. He'd have done it before, only he didn't dare. The second—well, he wasn't a good fellow, but he's dead. I was the third, and I'm what you see me."

What they saw was a man in danger of forgetting where he was and bringing forth from beneath his cynic's cloak a set of unorthodox opinions, strongly held.

"I suppose," said Lady Wrotham, "that every unbeliever thinks that there is reason for his unbeliefs, and when he looks round him and sees many people who profess religious views acting unworthily, and others following a false religion and playing with the truth, he may persuade himself that there is no truth to be found anywhere. But indeed it is not so, Captain Turner. There *is* truth in the Christian religion, and if you seek it earnestly you will find it for yourself. And you would hardly deny, I suppose, that you do meet Christian people, even in your retired life, who are a standing example of goodness?"

"No, I don't deny that," said Turner. "Women especially. There's Mrs. Redcliffe, now. She's a religious woman, and she's one of the best I know. If they were all like her!"

If he had thrown a bomb between Lady Wrotham and Mrs. Prentice he could hardly have produced a greater effect.

"You hold her up as an example!" exclaimed Lady Wrotham; and Mrs. Prentice, "Well, that is a nice thing to hear!"

Browne looked shocked and puzzled, Turner's eyes narrowed and his lips shut down. "Do you know Mrs. Redcliffe?" he asked.

"I have not seen her," replied Lady Wrotham. "But I have heard of her, and I do not approve of what I have heard."

Turner turned to Mrs. Prentice with a look of contempt, which he made no attempt to hide. He said nothing, but she replied angrily to his look.

"I don't know why you should stare at me like that," she said. "If you think I told Lady Wrotham what she knows of Mrs. Redcliffe, you are mistaken."

"Well," said Lady Wrotham, "it was what you told me of the way you were received yesterday that has given me the im-

pression I have formed of Mrs. Redcliffe. The other fact that I knew—but I wish to say nothing about that."

"But, excuse me, Lady Wrotham," said Mrs. Prentice. "I think it is hardly quite fair to me to put me in the position of having turned you against Mrs. Redcliffe with no reason at all. Captain Turner, and others too, I have no doubt, will only be too ready to accuse me of making mischief. It is their way, and I think a very mean way, of attacking me for not hiding my disapproval of their godless habits. I hope you will make it understood, at any rate, that there *is* something against Mrs. Redcliffe, even if you do not wish it to become generally known."

Lady Wrotham was not pleased. "I will say this, since you force me, Mrs. Prentice," she said stiffly, "but I knew something of Mrs. Redcliffe before I came to live here, which I should not have mentioned if I had not thought that it was common property. But my opinion of Mrs. Redcliffe is drawn entirely from what you told me of her yesterday. If everything you said was true, you have no reason to be ashamed of your straightforwardness in telling me the kind of ladies I have living practically in my park."

Turner rose. "Mrs. Redcliffe is a friend of mine and a friend of Mr. Browne's," he said. "There is nobody I have a higher respect for, and I think I may say the same of him. I shouldn't believe anything I heard against her, and I think it's a great pity, my lady, if you'll excuse my saying so, that you should take your opinions about her from Mrs. Prentice, who'd rather give people a bad character than not, instead of judging for yourself. I'll leave these behind, with your leave, and wish you good-evening."

He put down the packet of tracts on a table, made a bow and went out of the room.

"It's outrageous!" exclaimed Mrs. Prentice. "I told you, Lady Wrotham, what sort of a man he was."

Lady Wrotham was too much surprised by the turn events had taken to speak, but Browne, very red in the face, and stuttering somewhat, rose and delivered himself thus —

"Captain Turner is independent, and not very polite, and all that, but he's very sound, and what he says about Mrs. Redcliffe is quite true. There's no better woman anywhere. I think you will say so when you know her, Lady Wrotham."

"She sent a very impertinent message to me," replied the great lady.

"What—Mrs. Redcliffe?" exclaimed Browne. "That's a thing she couldn't do if she tried."

"It was the girl who sent the message," explained Mrs. Prentice. "Mrs. Redcliffe merely approved of it; but that was bad enough."

"Perhaps," said Lady Wrotham, "I have done her some injustice in my thoughts. She seems to have made good friends. When she comes to see me—I do not wish to see the girl—I shall be able to judge for myself. We must leave it there for the present. Captain Turner appears to be a difficult person to make friends with, Mr. Browne. I can forgive a certain amount of honest brusqueness, especially in the case of one whose birth is not perhaps of the highest."

"His birth is all right, Lady Wrotham," said Browne. "He comes of very good stock, and his education is better than most people's. It's his way to pretend he's nobody."

"Well, I do not care altogether for his way. And if he takes a pride in holding himself aloof from all religious influences, as seems to be the case, I don't know that he can be called a very satisfactory tenant. However, we can talk of that later. I hope you will be able to be present at our little service next Wednesday, Mr. Browne."

"Wednesday," said Browne, in deep perturbation. "No, I'm afraid I can't on Wednesday. It's a busy day."

"But your work is usually over by five o'clock, is it not?"

Browne hesitated. "Well, yes it is," he said with a burst. "But to tell you the truth, Lady Wrotham, I'd rather not come. I go to church on Sundays, and I should do that anyhow to set an example, even if I didn't care about it. But—well, it isn't quite in my line."

Lady Wrotham drew herself up. "I think in your position," she said, "you ought to do everything you can to help in what concerns the welfare of the tenantry."

"I do do everything I can, that lies in my way. But I don't mix myself up in their religious affairs."

"Well, of course, I have no right to press you. But I am disappointed. I am afraid there is a hard struggle before me if those who might help are determined to stand aloof. Mrs. Prentice, I think we had now better consult together as to arrangements."

Browne took his dismissal. He shook hands with Lady Wrotham, but not with Mrs. Prentice, and went out. His cart was waiting at the door. He climbed up into it, gathered up the reins and drove quickly out of the gate house. When he was out of hearing of the groom who had been holding his horse he exploded in a series of forcible ejaculations, which gathered in vehemence as he drove up the road towards his house. When he had got half way between the Abbey and the White House he saw Turner on the road in front of him, walking quickly with his head bent. He overtook him. "Where are you off to?" he asked.

Turner grumbled something indistinguishable, and walked on.

"Are you going up to Heath Gate?" asked Browne again. "'Cos I'm not going home just yet."

"No," said Turner shortly.

"I'm going to see Mrs. Redcliffe," said Browne.

Turner faced him angrily. "What do you want to go

putting your oar in there for?" he said. "You've backed up those two scandal-mongering women, and you ought to have the decency to keep away. I'm going there myself."

"Then we'll go together. It's nonsense to say I backed them up. I did nothing of the sort."

"Well, you didn't speak out. Spiteful cats! It's that Prentice woman chiefly, though your old woman's just as bad. And you'd have told them so if you'd got any pluck. But you haven't."

"I did tell 'em so, after you'd left. I'm as angry as you are. And her ladyship actually had the nerve to tell me that it was my duty as a land agent to go to her precious prayer-meetings."

"So it is. You're a parasite, as I told you, and you've got to kow-tow to your employers."

"She isn't my employer, and I'm not going to take on a lot of tea-party work to please her. I do my duty by the property, and that's all any one has a right to ask of me."

"I don't care what you do, except that if you don't show Mrs. Redcliffe that you'll stand by her through thick and thin I'll have nothing more to do with you."

"I told you I was going in now, didn't I? You cross-grained fool! What do you want to go for me for, when we're both in the same boat?"

"Thank goodness, I'm not in the same boat as you. I've had all I can do with of that old woman. If she comes up to see me she'll be shown the door. I pay my rent, don't I? She's no right to interfere with me in any way, and I'll tell her so if she tries it on again. Fancy giving me a bundle of tracts! I suppose you've got a pocketful of them."

"No, I've not," replied Browne. "And I said I shouldn't go to this meeting. Come now, Turner, what's the good of quarrelling with me? You've nothing against me. I haven't said anything about the way you behaved to her. It was dev-

ilish awkward for me. Any one would have thought you'd made up your mind to offend her."

"So I had. I'd heard rumours about some mischief hatching against Mrs. Redcliffe. News flies fast in this place, and the village has got hold of it. Kitcher told me so. I watched when I first brought in Mrs. Redcliffe's name, and I saw her face and that of the other cat go sour. I meant to give them a piece of my mind then, and I did it. Well, I'm going in here."

They had come to the gate of the White House, Turner on foot, Browne walking his horse beside him. "Just wait till I take the mare into the home-farm," said Browne, "and we'll go in together."

"I'm going in now," said Turner, and he walked up the drive.

Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda were in the parlour. Turner came in with a more open friendliness than was his wont. "Thought I'd look in and see if you wanted any more books to read," he said. "I've got a new lot down. I'm very late, Mrs. Redcliffe, but if you could give me a cup of tea I should be obliged."

"Ring the bell, Hilda," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "Captain Turner, I'm very pleased to see you. You have not been near me for weeks."

"Expect you'll see a good lot of me for the future. I generally like to see a bit more company in the Spring. Wanted to know whether you and Miss Hilda would come and dine with me to-morrow. We'll have a rubber. Suppose I must ask Browne, though I don't care for him."

Mrs. Redcliffe laughed. "What should you say if anybody else said anything against him?" she said. "Yes, thank you, Captain Turner, we shall be pleased to come."

Hilda had said nothing since Turner arrived. She stood by the fireplace watching him closely, as if she was trying to

make out from the side view of his face how far he could be trusted as a loyal friend. She opened her mouth as if she had something to say about her mother's acceptance of his invitation, but at that moment Browne came into the room.

His greeting was as friendly as that of Turner, perhaps rather more so. He threw himself into an easy-chair and mopped his brow, according to his custom. "Yes, thanks, I'd like another cup of tea, please," he said in answer to an inquiry. "Mrs. Redcliffe, will you and Hilda come up and dine with me to-morrow? We haven't had a rubber of Bridge for a long time. Turner's coming."

"No, he isn't," said Turner. "Mrs. Redcliffe and Miss Hilda are coming to dine with me to-morrow. You can come too if you like."

"Well, the next night, then," said Browne. "I've got some new potatoes."

Mrs. Redcliffe accepted this invitation also, with a smile.

"Mother dear," Hilda broke in, "it is very kind of Captain Turner, and Mr. Browne. But they ought to know, before we accept, that—that we will have nothing to do with Mrs. Prentice's friends. It must be either she or us."

"Hope you don't call me Mrs. Prentice's friend," said Turner. "Can't abide the woman."

"She's no friend of mine," said Browne.

Mrs. Redcliffe grew serious. "Perhaps Hilda is right," she said. "Mrs. Prentice is at enmity with us, over a definite cause, and I must say now that we are at enmity with her. Our friends are bound to hear of what has caused the break, and perhaps it will be better that they shall hear it from us."

"Don't want to hear anything," said Turner. "I've heard all I want already."

"And so have I," said Browne. "We're old friends, Mrs. Redcliffe, and we'll be better ones still."

"Then Mrs. Prentice has already begun to talk," said

Hilda. "And I suppose Lady Wrotham too. To think that there should be such women in the world! When did you hear of it—and where?"

"Just been calling on the old lady," said Turner, "and Mrs. Prentice was there. Never again. You're right, Miss Hilda, Mrs. Prentice ought to be put out of the way. She's not fit to live. But why worry about anything she says or does? We've got something else to talk about, I should hope."

"Then you are on our side," said Hilda, "absolutely, without any reservations?"

"'Course I am. You ought to have known it. And so's Browne, though he's too lazy to say so."

"It doesn't want saying," said Browne. "Mrs. Redcliffe knows us and we know her."

"You are two very kind friends," said Mrs. Redcliffe softly. "And I have never thought that you would say anything else. I am glad that you know. I am sorry that it was not known to my real friends long ago."

"And Lady Wrotham actually told you what she has against mother?" said Hilda. "Told two men, one of them a stranger to her, and before another woman! I wish I could tell her what I think of her."

"No, she didn't," said Browne. "To do her justice, she was annoyed with Mrs. Prentice for saying anything."

"She wasn't," said Turner. "They were both as bad as one another."

"Then Mrs. Prentice told you?"

"She would have done if Lady Wrotham hadn't stopped her," said Browne.

"Then you were not told? You don't know?" said Mrs. Redcliffe.

"We didn't want to listen to her lies," said Turner. "Neither of us."

"'Course not," Browne chimed in.

Mrs. Redcliffe was silent for a moment. Then she said in a low voice, "It is well to know what loyal friends one has. But if you do not know what Lady Wrotham has discovered about me, I will tell you myself."

"We don't want to know," said Turner. "What's it got to do with us?"

And Browne repeated his former remark, "You know us, Mrs. Redcliffe, and we know you."

"You will hear it from somebody," she said, "and I would rather you heard it from me. Lady Wrotham knew what others in England have not known, that I was my husband's second wife, and his first, who died within a year of her marriage, was my elder sister."

There was a pause. "Well," said Turner, "now Browne's curiosity is satisfied. And what on earth is there in that to make a fuss about? 'Pon my word, Mrs. Redcliffe, that woman ought to be lynched. She's got a tongue that would blacken an archangel."

"I don't know whether you have quite gathered the significance of what I have told you," said Mrs. Redcliffe. Browne, it was clear, had not at first done so, but apparently his brain had now brought him to a conclusion, for his face cleared.

"Oh, yes," he said. "But, hang it all, you know! Well, thank you for telling us, Mrs. Redcliffe, though it wouldn't have made any difference if you hadn't. You know us and we know you."

"Browne has gone through a good deal this afternoon," said Turner. "You mustn't mind his repeating himself. Well, I must be off, Mrs. Redcliffe. I'm dining at Oakhurst to-night and I must get home. Then I shall see you all to-morrow evening—usual time. Good-bye."

He shook hands with a warm grasp and departed. Hilda went with him to the outer door. "You're very kind, Cap-

tain Turner," she said; "I was sure you and Mr. Browne would be, but I am very pleased all the same."

He turned to her with a chuckle. "You gave her a piece of your mind, didn't you?" he said. "Told her to tell the old woman to go to the deuce, eh?"

"Well, not that exactly," said Hilda, smiling at him. "But whatever I said she deserved—both of them deserved."

"Deserve! They deserve hanging. You keep it up, Miss Hilda. Don't you let 'em worry your mother. She's the best mother you'll ever have, or any one else either. Good-bye."

He disappeared along the garden path as if he had been shot out of a catapult, and Hilda returned to the parlour.

She found Browne and her mother in deep talk. "I assure you, Mrs. Redcliffe," Browne was saying, "that it was pretty nearly all Mrs. Prentice's fault. I don't want to defend Lady Wrotham. She annoyed me infernally this afternoon, and she ought not to have let it out, to Mrs. Prentice of all people. But to do her justice she did prevent the other woman blurting it out when she wanted to, and said she shouldn't have told anybody if she'd known it was—not gen'ly known."

"Are you trying to excuse Lady Wrotham?" asked Hilda.

"Mr. Browne is quite right to excuse her if there is an excuse," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "And I am glad to hear what he says."

"It's only just on that one point I'd excuse her," said Browne. "I put most of the trouble down to Mrs. Prentice. I don't deny that her ladyship was—well, annoyed with you, because, of course, Mrs. Prentice had been making all the mischief she could. She repeated something that Hilda had said about Lady Wrotham to her yesterday and made the most of it."

Hilda laughed. "I'm glad of that at any rate," she said. "But it was I who said it, and not mother. Why Lady

Wrotham should have the impertinence to be annoyed with her I don't know."

"Well, Mrs. Prentice I don't defend at all," said Browne. "But Lady Wrotham I do, up to a certain point. She said herself that she was glad to hear she had been mistaken about you, and said when you went to see her, she—she ——"

"She should judge for herself. Was that it, Mr. Browne?"

Browne hesitated, and Hilda broke in. "Go to see her, indeed! That is a nice thing to suggest."

"I cannot go to see Lady Wrotham, Mr. Browne," said Mrs. Redcliffe, and Hilda, "I should think not, indeed!"

"Well, you know best," said Browne. "I only thought—however, you'll do what you like, of course."

Soon afterwards he took his leave. Hilda did not accompany him to the door. "Fancy suggesting that you should call on Lady Wrotham!" she said. "It seems to me that Mr. Browne is trying to be your friend and Lady Wrotham's at the same time. He's not like Captain Turner."

"He is an honest and loyal gentleman," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "You must remember, Hilda, that it is not possible for him to break off from Lady Wrotham altogether, and I don't see at all why he should. We must not be too exacting to our friends. I think we are very fortunate in having two such generous ones as Captain Turner and Mr. Browne."

CHAPTER XIX

RUMOUR, AND A MEETING

Rumour, with its thousand tongues, soon spread the news about Mrs. Redcliffe that Lady Wrotham had brought down to Exton. It is not necessary to suppose that Mrs. Prentice took the lead in setting it flying, although, when she was addressed on the subject, she made no secret of her opinions —opinions, she said, which it grieved her to have to hold but which hold she must if she was to keep her self-respect as a religious woman. The village had got hold of it somehow; possibly the first thin thread of fact had been drawn by a servant, either at the Abbey or the vicarage, through a keyhole, but this was never known. The village gossiped and talked scandal, and a few of the more virtuous matrons sniffed at Mrs. Redcliffe in the open street. But there being not the slightest genuine feeling against marriage with a deceased wife's sister in the abstract, there could be none against a lady, otherwise much respected and liked, who had contracted such a marriage years before. And Mrs. Redcliffe had her warm champions amongst the villagers, as well as amongst those in higher places, who expressed themselves strongly against Mrs. Prentice's known attitude towards her. Finally, when it became known that in Australia, where Mrs. Redcliffe had married, the law was as it was, popular opinion set strongly against Mrs. Prentice for stirring up a fuss about nothing, and Mrs. Redcliffe's position with her humbler neighbours was put on a firmer basis of liking than ever. Until this state of feeling settled down there was very little that could disturb her, but a good deal of unobtrusive sympathy which showed the general respect and liking in which she was held.

But with the surrounding gentry she had to go through a good deal. There were very few who took the view that Mrs. Prentice's strict code had imposed upon her, none indeed with whom she was at all intimate. But curiosity and gossip fluttered about her like ugly birds. It was the first subject to be introduced by those who now came flocking to give Lady Wrotham a welcome to Exton Abbey, but Lady Wrotham would have none of it. She was very sorry that she had put it about, she said. At least she had not put it about, as she had had no idea that it was not known. She would prefer not to discuss it. Every one seemed to speak well of Mrs. Redcliffe, and she for her part had nothing to say against her. Mrs. Redcliffe had not yet done her the honour of calling on her and it was not her habit to talk over the affairs of people she did not know.

Yes, certainly, her visitors, or most of them, would say. Nothing could really be said against Mrs. Redcliffe. She lived very quietly and did not go about much, but those who did know her liked her, and the girl was a delightful creature.

Lady Wrotham had nothing to say about the girl. She rather fancied her manners were not of the best, but she did not know her, and—perhaps the subject might be changed.

At the bottom of her heart a feeling of deep annoyance was growing against Mrs. Prentice, who, she was fully assured, was responsible for spreading the report, although that lady had vehemently denied it. It was intolerable that she should be forced to take part in this petty local gossip, and be considered, besides, to be the origin of it. And it annoyed her to have to keep this resentment to herself, for, although she disbelieved the assurances that were given her, she was not yet prepared to say so, and Mrs. Prentice was now proving herself a valuable go-between in the designs she had for converting the inhabitants of Exton to the views of the Women's Refor-

mation League. She had quite made up her mind, however, that if the day came when Mrs. Prentice played her false in those matters which she had so much at heart, she would speak her mind in a way that would surprise that lady.

Foiled at the fountain head, the country neighbours as a rule made their way on leaving the Abbey, those who wished to treat the disclosure as an agreeable scandal to Mrs. Prentice, and the better disposed to Mrs. Redcliffe herself. The former gained more for their trouble, for they had a more or less detailed and not entirely colourless account of Mrs. Prentice's memorable interview with Mrs. Redcliffe, and, as a wind up, Hilda's defiance of Lady Wrotham, which lost nothing in the telling. The latter got small satisfaction. They found Mrs. Redcliffe serene but uncommunicative, and Hilda watchful and ready to take offence at the smallest hint of what was in their minds. There were one or two who were sincerely sorry for what had happened. These made no fishing references, but were more than usually cordial, as Turner and Browne had been, and they came away with the conviction that Mrs. Redcliffe was a woman in a thousand and shamefully used by malicious tongues. So that even in this series of visitations there were bright spots, and Hilda was not able to feel that all the world was against them, as in her more fiery moods she would perhaps have liked to feel.

In the middle of these happenings, the first of Lady Wrotham's private religious services, which were to form the antidote to the poison of the Vicar's teaching, took place in the dining-hall of the Abbey. As a start off she invited a clerical friend of her own persuasion from London to stay with her and conduct the proceedings. He was a good man and a gentleman, but Mrs. Prentice's gorge rose at him, for he was everything that she had hitherto despised. He wore a moustache and a layman's collar, and he spoke with a sort

of pious bleat which she found it hard to bear. But she had compensations. Lady Wrotham was particularly friendly to her that afternoon, and called her "my dear" in face of the assembly.

Mrs. Capper was there, dressed very smartly, and anxious to assist in guiding the worshippers to such seats as should best indicate their respective importance in the social scale; but her ladyship's servants were so used to these gatherings, and managed things in such a cold-blooded, efficient way, that there was no occasion for her efforts, and she had to content herself with a seat in the front row, to which she was shown by virtue of her smart clothes. There was a considerable gathering of women, but no men, Mrs. Prentice having found a difficulty in persuading them to come, and Lady Wrotham having decided after all that they were not wanted. Most of the women were there out of curiosity, and treated the occasion as a mild sort of entertainment, of which the tea was the crowning point and the service a not unreasonable form of payment. The clerical leader moved them somewhat, and there was nothing controversial in his address, except my implication. The meeting would have been innocuous and something better, if it had not been announced—chiefly by Mrs. Capper, taking her cue from the great lady's original statement to her—that it was intended as a counterblast to the orthodox church services. As it was, signs of cleavage began to show themselves immediately on the dispersal of the congregation. There was not wanting a party, led by Mrs. Capper, who declared themselves on Lady Wrotham's side against the goings on of the Vicar, although few of them had had any quarrel with him hitherto; and there were others who took his part warmly, many of them out of antagonism to Mrs. Prentice, whose going over to the enemy was commented on in no mild terms.

For it was, of course, noticeable that the Vicar had not

been present at the meeting, was indeed, at the time it was being held, equably pursuing his pastoral duties at the further end of the Manor. He had been asked as a matter of form, but, as it had been made clear to him that his acceptance would be considered as a definite act of resignation of the position he was known to hold, he had naturally not accepted the invitation. But this did not prevent Lady Wrotham from describing him to her intimate correspondents as a minister who held sullenly aloof from every Christian effort not set on foot by himself. An invitation to dine on the evening of the meeting, to meet Lady Wrotham's clerical friend, he did accept, somewhat to her surprise. She had not yet given up all hopes that he would be moved by his wife to a realization of his errors, and was unwilling as yet to enter into an open quarrel in which the mildest social truce would become impossible, but she would have preferred that he should refuse her invitation.

The Vicar and his wife walked down to the Abbey together at eight o'clock. They were chatting on unimportant subjects—a country clergyman and his wife going out peaceably to dine at the great house of the parish, the lady with her prim finery bunched up under a waterproof, her husband in soft felt hat and black overcoat, carrying her evening shoes in his pocket—to all appearance good friends, one in the pursuit of duty and the enjoyment of the simple pleasures that lighten such a lot as theirs. Who could have told that there was a black cloud between them, growing ever bigger and threatening to destroy the comfort of a companionship that had afforded for five and twenty years, if not unruffled peace, as high an average of contentment as falls to the lot of most people?

Mrs. Prentice was certainly not tasting contentment at this time. It is true that she possessed, as far as she knew, the approval of Lady Wrotham, and was on terms, as she

hoped, of permanent intimacy with the great lady, closer than any one around her enjoyed. And it looked as if she were in a fair way of paying out Mrs. Redcliffe for her monstrous behaviour, for rumour was now busy with that lady's name, and opinion had not yet settled down in her favour, as it did later. But the question was whether these two gratifying facts, taken together, balanced the loss of her husband's confidence, which had been for the last few days entirely withdrawn from her.

William was behaving to her in a way he had never done before. There had been an angry scene between them when he had come home from his interview with Mrs. Redcliffe. He had been whole-hearted in his defence of that lady and most violent in his condemnation of her, his wedded wife. Fortified by her alliance with Lady Wrotham and the purity of her own motives, she had retorted on him angrily, and informed him in a counterblast that she had been reconsidering her religious position, and discovered that in many things, although in none for which he could blame her, she had been in error; and that, since his beliefs led him to behave no better than a savage, she had had enough of them, and proposed to try a simpler and, as far as she could judge, a more efficacious form of Christianity. He had left her without a word, and she had congratulated herself on having gained a complete victory over him.

But her satisfaction had been short-lived. When they had next met he had treated her as if nothing had passed between them, with a measure of coldness certainly, but not with displeasure. This had gone on ever since, and it had not suited her. He had peremptorily declined to discuss any question with her which had to do either with his own work or her new activities. "You are taking your own line," he had said on the first occasion on which she had endeavoured to do so, "and it is a line of which I heartily

disapprove. I will not talk to you about it. As long as you are doing all you can to wreck my work here and give the lie to all your previous convictions, that is the only condition on which we can go on living under the same roof." This was the only time on which he had broken through his aloofness to speak directly, and he had spoken so contemptuously that his words had unpleasantly affected Mrs. Prentice's vanity. Since then there had been no communication between them except on merely surface subjects.

But for a husband and wife, who had hitherto worked together with constant give and take and frequent wordy adjustments of harness, to live on such terms as these was not possible without mutually antagonistic developments going on beneath the surface. They were existing as on a slope, and not a plane. The Vicar knew that a struggle was before him, of which he could not yet foresee the end, and it disturbed him greatly to have to shut up in his own mind the thoughts and fears that exercised him concerning it, disturbed him greatly, too, that she with whom he had been accustomed to talk over such problems as these, with the certainty, at any rate, of community of aim, and the advantage that came from self-expression, should now actually be working apart from and against him. It is true that he had taken up his present attitude to her, knowing what she was, with the conviction that it would finally bring her back to her proper allegiance; but the days went on and she still acted perversely, and he was beginning to take a dark view of the future. At present, and until Lady Wrotham should fulfill her threat of taking action, his wife was alone responsible for the disturbance of his life and work, and it is not surprising that an ever increasing sense of bitterness should have been growing up against her in his mind, or that she, pursuing her course, should have gained no happiness from it.

Lady Wrotham's dinner party of four was hardly likely, under the existing circumstances, to afford more than refreshment of the body. She herself, with the traditions of hospitality with which she had been brought up, would, if she had had her own way, have kept the conversation clear of subjects in which a possibility of disagreement existed. And the Reverend Mr. Dacre, to do him justice, had no intention of promoting discord. But his mind was full of the message he conceived it his life's work to spread, and if he were to talk at all he must talk on that subject and no other. The advice of St. Paul, sublimely tactless, if it is to be interpreted as those who chiefly apply it believe, was his warrant for treating the differences of Christians as if they did not exist. He must be instant in season, out of season, and the only difference he could make between those who were outside the truth and those who presumably accepted it, was in exhorting the former as from pope-like authority, and assuming that the latter held his own interpretation of dogma and no other. The Vicar, agreeing where he could, silent where he could not, unwilling to oppose his own views to statements and aspirations implicitly denying them, held his own as well as he could in a conversation having to do with the missionary zeal of Mr. Dacre and his associates, of whom Mr. Dacre assumed him to be one. "Surely," said the harassed Vicar to himself, "there is some hypocrisy here! The man must know that I do not agree with his views. He has been brought here into my parish for that very reason." And he wished the evening over.

The two clergymen remained in the dining-room only a few minutes after the ladies had left them. Mr. Prentice refused wine and the cigarette offered to him by the butler, for fear of drawing upon himself a rebuke from the Low Churchman, and his nerves were not soothed by his abstinence. He had nothing to say, and sat silent until the other,

awaking from a reverie, looked at him across the table with a happy smile, and said, "I think we were blessed in our little service this afternoon. It seemed to be a time of refreshment to many."

"I hope it was," replied the Vicar, "but of course you know that it was held to a great extent as a protest against my own services, and you were asked to conduct it, Mr. Dacre, because the doctrines I teach, as the Vicar of the parish, are not acceptable to Lady Wrotham?"

Mr. Dacre looked shocked. "But surely," he said, "the simple Bible reading and prayer and the singing of gospel hymns which we enjoyed this afternoon can only help in the work of grace! You cannot feel, as some parish ministers unfortunately do, that a fellow-labourer in the same vineyard is interfering in your godly work, by seeking simply to strengthen your own exhortations?"

"I am afraid I am one of the parish ministers who do think so," replied the Vicar. "And I should like to ask you candidly, Mr. Dacre, whether you would not feel the same if our positions were reversed. Supposing you were the vicar of this parish and were teaching to the best of your ability the doctrines in which you believe, and I were to be brought in to explain to your parishioners that those doctrines were false, that the change from a state of sin to a state of grace comes not at conversion but at baptism, and that the appointed and only safe spiritual food for Christians is given through the sacraments of the Church, would you not feel that I was interfering with your work and doing anything rather than strengthen your own influence?"

"Oh, but those doctrines are unscriptural. There is no warrant for them."

"But you must be well aware that they are held by many thousands, and are to be found everywhere in the Church of England. You must know that I for one hold them, and that

it is to put my people in the way of thinking them unscriptural that you are here."

"If that is so ——"

"But, Mr. Dacre, don't you know that it is so? I would willingly have met you on friendly terms, and even been glad to talk over religious matters with you, if it had been recognized by both of us, as it ought to have been, that there are differences of opinion between us, although we have so much fundamentally in common. But all through dinner you have chosen to assume with regard to me what you must know quite well is not the case, that I am in entire agreement with your views, and you must forgive me for saying that it does not seem to me to be honest."

Mr. Dacre looked genuinely grieved. "An accusation of dishonesty ought not to be lightly made," he said.

"I do not make it lightly. Would you think it honest of me in a like position to take it for granted that you held the Catholic view of the Church—were, if you like to put it so, a High Churchman—knowing all the time that you were not? I am sure you would have protested at once."

"Certainly I should. And, my dear friend, if I have unwittingly caused you offence, I sincerely ask your pardon. But we are both working for God, according to the light He gives us, and His grace is wide enough to cover all our differences."

"I think it is," said the Vicar, "if we rely on it, instead of fighting one another."

"I think," said Mr. Dacre, with a sweet smile, "that it is only you who want to fight." And then they joined the ladies.

The Vicar and his wife left shortly afterwards, much to Lady Wrotham's relief, as she would not have been willing to forego her usual family prayers, nor put one of her guests to the discomfort of being obliged to take part in a service of which he had expressed his disapproval.

Mrs. Prentice, on the walk home, warmed by the good cheer of which she had partaken and the memory of an intimate chat with the great lady, of which her own share had been most successfully carried through, had an impulse, rather pathetic, of affection towards her husband. She tried to take his arm, and said, "Mr. Dacre is a very earnest man. Don't you think so, William?"

The Vicar uncrooked his elbow, and let his wife's hand fall to her side. "I think a good many things about Mr. Dacre," he said coldly. "But they would hardly interest you at present, Agatha."

Mrs. Prentice drew herself into her shell, and spoke no more.

CHAPTER XX

A RAILWAY JOURNEY, AND WHAT FOLLOWED

Mr. Frederick Prentice, in pursuance of his promise to pay a week-end visit to his home at no distant date, had himself conveyed to Waterloo Station one Friday afternoon about a month after Easter, and presented himself at the first-class booking-office. He found himself forestalled there by a lady of more than usual personal attractions, who was asking for a ticket to Exton as he came up. Behind her stood her maid holding, amongst other travelling effects, a dressing-bag with the initials N. O'K. embossed on it. Fred Prentice grasped the situation immediately and experienced the pleasureable sensation which is felt by young men of an admiring and susceptible nature when confronted with female charms of a high order. He congratulated himself on at last coming face to face with Mrs. O'Keefe, of whose good looks he had heard much, but not, as he now thought, more than enough, and he instantly decided that he would not wait for an introduction until he reached home, but would deny himself indulgence in the smoking of tobacco during the coming journey, and travel in Mrs. O'Keefe's company.

The way was made unexpectedly easy for him, for when the lady came to pay for her ticket she discovered that she had just enough money in her purse to enable her to do so, but none over for a ticket for her maid. She must have given a sovereign in mistake for a shilling to her cabman, it was decided in hurried consultation between the two of them; she remembered that he had driven off quickly without thanking her, which she had thought odd at the time, because she had doubted whether the three shillings she thought she had

given him was really enough for all that distance and all that luggage. And, of course, she had not taken his number, and even if she had, there would not be time to—and what on earth were they to do now? Fred came forward at this point and introduced himself, and put the matter straight. Mrs. O'Keefe was profusely grateful to him. She could not think what she should have done without him. He, of course, made light of his services, but as they walked to the train together, she explaining and he sympathizing, diffidence on either side was completely washed away, and it seemed only natural that they should settle themselves in the same carriage for the journey, and even admit some anxiety as to the intrusion of a third party.

They had the carriage to themselves as far as Archester, and drank straw-coloured tea in entire amity out of the basket Fred had ordered, talking all the time. Fred asked permission to light a cigarette, and received it; and the evening papers with which they had both provided themselves remained folded on the seats beside them. Never was a more agreeable opening of friendship between a good-looking, pleasant-spoken young man and a beautiful young woman—if only a looker-on, sympathetic on the point of such openings, had not known what we as onlookers do know.

After the subject of the substituted sovereign had been discussed in all its bearings, the conversation turned to Exton and its inhabitants.

"So much has happened there since I have left," said Norah O'Keefe. "I suppose Lady Wrotham is fully installed now, and has begun to lead everything and everybody. I am dying to see her."

"I think she has already begun to be rather tiresome about the church services," said Fred. "I had a letter from my father. He didn't say much, but I gathered that she objected to a good deal and had told him so."

"I haven't heard from anybody while I have been away, except one letter from Hilda Redcliffe just after I left, and that was before Lady Wrotham came. I have written to her once or twice but she hasn't answered. I can't think why. Have you seen anything of the Redcliffes lately?"

"I saw them when I was down at Exton."

"I hope you like them as much as I do. Mrs. Redcliffe is the dearest woman, and Hilda is just as good, only rather impetuous, because she is young and hasn't seen much of the world yet."

"Not as much as you have," suggested Fred, with a conquering smile.

"Well, that is hardly to be expected," she said, more seriously, "although I am not much older than she. But don't you think she is a delightful girl?"

Fred said he did think so, and turned the conversation again towards the personality of his companion, in whom he exhibited a sympathetic interest skilfully adapted to make her talk about herself. And yet he had set out on his journey an hour before hugging himself at the thought of seeing Hilda Redcliffe so soon, and if he had been told that he should travel to Exton in the company of a lady who wished to talk about her and praise her, would have thought himself happy. Norah O'Keefe brought in her name again shortly after, and again met with a perfunctory agreement and an apparent unwillingness to pursue the subject further. She looked at him with some measure of appraisement in her eyes. She was Hilda Redcliffe's intimate friend and must have heard something of her doings during those Christmas holidays, which Fred had described regretfully as the best of vanished seasons. She said no more about Hilda, but told him a good deal about herself, rather more, perhaps, than she might have done had he not betrayed such a keen interest in all she did tell him. And when the train reached Greathampton at the end of an hour and a half's run, Fred

ventured to say that he never remembered the journey passing so quickly, and she did not contradict him.

They walked up and down the platform while they waited for the slow train by which they were to finish their journey. The sea-smell attacked their nostrils freshly, and the closing dusk gave a tender turn to brisk thoughts of Spring and pleasure. The sweet face of the girl, for she was nothing more than a girl, framed in the waves of her bright hair and the furs about her neck, her pretty clothes, and her air of frank comradeship, heightened by the mysterious feminine charms of her youth and beauty, went to Fred's brain like wine. Episodes in his life, in which he had experienced something of these same sensations, prepared him to give a welcome to an intoxication which transcended them all. His feelings towards Hilda had rested on other influences, although he told himself afterwards that he had tried to impart to them this same glamour, and failed. His love for her, such as it was, went out without the flicker of an effort to hold its own, and he gave himself over entirely to this new influence, was indeed swept off his feet by it and swam in deep waters without a struggle to regain the shore. By the time the train had dropped them at the wayside station which served Exton and its neighbourhood, and Norah had driven off in her brougham and he in the vicarage cart, he told himself that he had come to the crisis of his life, and sat lapped in a fervour of sweet thoughts as he drove home across the twilit heath and through the verdurous glooms of the forest, looking back every now and then at the twin lamps of the carriage following him, and picturing to himself the wonderful creature who sat within it enshrined in the dusk.

One may pause a moment to consider the first glamorous steps of such a passion, tending of itself to no baseness, and wonder how far the self-absorption it engenders will avail to muffle the call of honour. Pity, that the summons which

brings the deeper natures to harbour, wafts the lighter to no sure anchorage.

Fred was not sorry that his mother had not come to the station to meet him, as was her wont, but he was a little surprised, although he did not give the matter much thought until he reached home. There he was soon informed about the affairs which were disturbing the peace of Exton. His father was away attending a meeting at Oakhurst, and would not be back until nine o'clock supper, and his mother was glad to have the hour which intervened clear for a talk with him. She told him that she had intended to come to the station to meet him, but had had to go and see Lady Wrotham about something of importance.

"How do you get on with Lady Wrotham, mother?" he asked. "You have told me nothing about her in your letters. In fact, you have hardly written to me since I was here last."

"I have been very much occupied," said Mrs. Prentice. "But there is a great deal to tell you, Fred. We are passing through a very anxious time here, and I didn't want to write about things that we could talk over when you came down."

"Lady Wrotham is making a fuss about the services, isn't she?"

"Well, I don't know that she is doing that exactly. She is quite out of sympathy with ritualism of any kind, but she is a very religious woman and very anxious that the people should —should be religious too. I find it a great help to have her advice and encouragement on what I try to do myself."

"And what about father? Where does he come in?"

"I am sorry to say that your father has not been like himself lately. He never talks to me about things, and he holds himself aloof from all the efforts Lady Wrotham and I are making."

"Well, I don't wonder, mother, if she is trying to dictate to him as to how he shall conduct his own services. He told me that. But how does it suit you? Surely you are keener on what I call the frills than father is!"

"I have come to believe, Fred, that you are right in thinking them excrescences. I do not care for the word frills. There is none of that at Hurstbury, and Lady Wrotham draws a very attractive picture of the way all the people go to church there and attend any services and meetings got up for their benefit. I think that if the same sort of spirit existed here it would be a good thing for the parish."

"Well, that is a change of face, mother!"

Mrs. Prentice was offended. "That is not at all the way to look at it, Fred," she said. "It is very distressing to me to have to go against your father in these or any other matters, but I must follow my conscience, even when it is difficult to do so, and even in the short experience I have had I can see that there is more vital religion amongst the evangelicals than the ritualists. I don't want to say anything against your father—it would not be right to do so, to you—but really he is so obstinate in his ideas, and so incapable of judging where the right is, that—that it is most difficult for me at present."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes. She felt herself sorely tried, and it was a relief to her to pour out her trouble to her son. Fred, his mind filled with other thoughts, gave but slight attention to the disclosures that were being made to him. He knew his mother very well, and could form a pretty clear idea of the reasons that lay behind her various actions. If she was on awkward terms with his father for the time being, she would come round, as she had done before; and, anyhow, the affairs on which they were at issue were not of much importance. But her next words effectually gained his attention.

"I didn't know he had written to you," she said. "He

tells me nothing now. But, if he has, he will probably have told you of this disgraceful business about Mrs. Redcliffe. He takes a most unchristian line there, and one that I cannot forgive him for, considering all the circumstances, and how I have been mixed up in it."

Fred stared at her. "Mrs. Redcliffe! Disgraceful business!" he exclaimed. "What on earth do you mean, mother? No, he told me nothing of that."

"Well, it turns out that Mrs. Redcliffe has been living here all this time on false pretences. She is not Mrs. Redcliffe at all. I don't know what she is, but she has no right to that name. I will go on protesting as long as I have breath that she is not properly married."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Fred. "Mrs. Redcliffe of all people!"

"Oh, I don't want to convey anything worse than the reality, if anything could be worse. Goodness knows I have suffered enough for daring to hold the opinions that I do. She is a deceased wife's sister. Mr. Redcliffe married her elder sister and then went through a form of marriage with her."

"Oh, is that all?" said Fred.

"ALL!" repeated his mother passionately. "And is it not enough? The Church will have nothing to do with such a wicked travesty of marriage as that, and I will have nothing to do with it either. And do you think that if Mrs. Redcliffe had not been thoroughly ashamed of it, she would have hidden it, as she has, from those who have allowed themselves to make friends with her? Of course she would not."

"I don't know. But surely, mother, you are not going to quarrel with Mrs. Redcliffe because of this! How did you find it out?"

"Lady Wrotham knew of it and was of course naturally annoyed to come here and find the woman sitting on her very door-step, so to speak. She is very charitable, a good deal

more so than I should be in her case, but she has been upset by the insolence of that girl, and I could see she would give a lot to have them out of the place. And she is coming down here, an old lady, to end her days in peace, to be treated like that! It is too bad."

"Why, what has—has Hilda done?"

"She was extremely insolent to me, and so was Mrs. Redcliffe when they found out that I knew about it, and the girl had the impudence to shout after me a rude message to give to Lady Wrotham."

"Which you gave?"

"She dragged it out of me. But I have done with them for ever, and so have a good many other people in the neighbourhood, though, as might be expected, Captain Turner—a pretty captain, *he* is—and Mr. Browne, who is about as stupid as he can be, and always follows the other man's lead, have turned themselves into her champions and are always at the White House, as thick as thieves. And, as I say, your father for some unaccountable reason, chooses to put all his convictions behind his back and say that nothing has happened to make any difference in his friendship with the Redcliffes. He has the sense, though, not to go there very often, and I suppose we must be thankful for that small mercy. I do hope, Fred, that you will not make it more difficult for me by being seen at the White House, and about with the Redcliffes. There is no reason at all why you should, for the short time you will be here."

Fred thought for a moment. He did not want to go to the White House. He would hardly have known what to do or to say when he got there. At the same time, he did not want to appear to be keeping away because of what had come out about Mrs. Redcliffe. He thought that his mother absurdly overrated the significance of her discovery, and that it was hard on Mrs. Redcliffe to treat her with such hostility. He ought

to show her that he was far from being in sympathy with that hostility. And he would do so, if occasion served. In the meantime he had something of far greater import to concern him.

"There is nothing particular to take me to the White House," he said. "I say, mother, I came down from Waterloo with Mrs. O'Keefe. She really is charming, and just as beautiful as you said." He had not the art to stop a blush as he introduced the name of the fair one, but Mrs. Prentice was too occupied to notice it.

"Oh, she has come home, has she?" she said. "That will complicate matters, for the Redcliffes have managed to worm themselves in there—I suppose because she has a handle to her name. Really, the snobbishness of some people is past all belief. I should like to tell her how matters stand before she hears a garbled account from her precious friends."

"Why don't you go in and see her to-night after supper? I'd go with you."

A pang of shame struck him as he spoke. He was willing that Hilda and her mother should be vilified, if that would gain him an hour in the company he desired. But the pang was instantly swallowed up in the eagerness of his wish.

"I think perhaps we might do that," said Mrs. Prentice. "She has been away for a month, and could hardly take it amiss."

"Well, I must go and unpack my clothes, and dress," said Fred. "I suppose father will be home soon?"

"Not for half-an-hour," said his mother. "Don't go yet, Fred. I have such a lot to talk to you about. And you needn't dress to-night. It is only supper."

"I think I'll dress. I shall be more comfortable," he said, and he rose from his chair. He was not going to present himself to the object of his desire late in the evening in a tweed suit. And he wanted to get away from his mother, and

think. She insisted upon coming up to his room to unpack for him, but he got rid of her in ten minutes and arrayed himself in his finest, to the accompaniment of tumultuous thoughts, in which the troubles of the Redcliffes, his once desired friends, found no place.

The Vicar gave his son an affectionate welcome when he reached home, but he looked worried and anxious. The talk over the supper table dragged. Mrs. Prentice and her husband were hardly on speaking terms, and the remarks they addressed to one another were perfunctory. And Fred was in that early stage of passion in which a blissful reverie is so constantly demanded by the situation that it is apt to be indulged in even when the presence of others would seem to require some effort to throw off for a time the delightful incubus. The meal did not take very long, and as Mrs. Prentice rose from the table, she said, "If we are going down to see Mrs. O'Keefe, Fred, I think we ought to go directly. It is half-past nine."

Fred needed no second bidding, and sprang up from his seat. But the Vicar stopped him. "Wait a minute," he said. "Has Mrs. O'Keefe come back yet?"

"Yes, I came down with her this evening," said Fred.

"Why should you want to go and see her at this time of the evening?"

"She has been away for a month," said Mrs. Prentice, "and I thought it would be kind just to go over and see how she is."

"I won't have it," said the Vicar. "You may leave Mrs. O'Keefe to find out for herself what is happening here."

"Indeed, William," began Mrs. Prentice indignantly, but he broke in on her hotly; "I tell you, I won't have it, Agatha. I have left you alone to take your own way so far, but this is too much. You are not to go to Mrs. O'Keefe to-night."

"Well, really ——"

"I definitely forbid you to go. Sit down, Fred, and drink your wine."

The Vicar was not to be disobeyed by wife or son when in this mood. Fred sat down obediently, in deep depression, and Mrs. Prentice left the room with as close an appearance of dignified offence as she could effect.

"I suppose you have been told of what has been discovered about Mrs. Redcliffe," said the Vicar, when she had shut the door behind her. "She is in no way to blame, and it distresses me beyond measure that your mother should take the view she does of what has happened. A good woman like that, who has made a mistake in her life—from the strictest point of view it was nothing more than that—ought to be treated with extra sympathy if she is in trouble about it, and not persecuted. I won't say more, but I am greatly disturbed over what is happening."

"I don't see what she can be blamed for," said Fred, and there was silence for a time.

The Vicar roused himself. "Well, my boy," he said, "I am glad to see you home again. And how are you getting on? Getting through a lot of work, I hope."

"Oh, yes, father; I wanted to talk to you—I've got hold of something. If I can go in for it it ought to be a jolly good thing for me—it isn't a chance you'd get every day."

"Well, what is it, Fred? I suppose you mean you want to put money into something. I don't think you ought to do that, you know, till you get called."

"If I waited till then I should lose this chance. And it's one in a thousand. A fellow I know well is going in for it and he gave me the opportunity. He could easily have got somebody else."

"Well, what is it?"

"It's the rights in a patent. My friend has got hold

of a German inventor who has discovered colour photography."

"Oh, my dear Fred!"

"But, father, I've seen it. It is the most wonderful work. There's no doubt about it. There's an enormous fortune in it. I said a patent, but it isn't exactly that. If it was patented, the secret would be given away. This German found it out by chance, and he says the chances are a million to one against anybody else hitting on it. We just want two thousand pounds. My friend—Salter his name is—he was at Oxford with me—will put in one thousand and I should have to put in the other. Then we should work the thing and take a third share each. The German hasn't got any money."

"I don't think it sounds the sort of thing, Fred, that you ought to sink almost every penny you have in. Supposing this German is a fraud."

"But he isn't. He's done what he says he can do. I've seen it. It's wonderful. There's nothing like it. There are all the colours, perfect; it is like looking at a real scene."

"Have you got one of his pictures here?"

"No. I meant to bring one down to show you. But he only has three of them. It's an expensive process—at least it costs as much to do one as to do hundreds, and his money gave out. He can't begin again till he gets it all settled up."

"H'm. Well, of course it may be all right. If he has really discovered proper colour photography, there ought to be a lot in it, as you say. We will talk about it again, Fred—I must go into my study now—and see what can be done. I shall have more time to-morrow."

Fred sat a little longer at the table. With a certain fortune awaiting him, and love smiling on his path, he felt himself one of the most favoured of mortals.

If Mrs. Prentice had succeeded in her intention of calling

on Mrs. O'Keefe that evening, she would not have found her. Norah had learnt of what had befallen her friends before she had been long in her house, and immediately after dinner she had attired herself and summoned her maid to accompany her to the White House. There had been no occasion for explanations or discussions. The three women had fallen on one another's necks and shed a few tears together. Then she had told them of her visits and adventures, sitting with her hand clasped in Hilda's, and returned home at eleven o'clock, leaving behind her the solace of her warm Irish heart.

CHAPTER XXI

TWO VISITS

THE embargo which the Vicar had set upon his wife's visit to Mrs. O'Keefe was considered by Mrs. Prentice to have removed itself automatically by the next morning. It was really of very great importance that she should see Mrs. O'Keefe at once, for there was no telling what might happen if Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda were to pounce down and get their talons into her. She would at any rate be put into quite a false position, and Mrs. Prentice, apart from a natural desire to get the better of her opponents, would be sorry from altruistic motives that this should happen to one whom she honoured with her friendship, and quite intended, as a reward for good behaviour, that Lady Wrotham should also honour with as much friendship as was desirable. This was how the matter presented itself to her, and she resolved to visit Mrs. O'Keefe directly her husband should have shut himself up in his study, which on Saturday morning he was accustomed to do at half-past nine o'clock. Not that she wished to hide her intention from him; she hoped she knew what was due to him better than that. But these constant bickerings and this unmanly violence were painful, and to be avoided if possible.

She had not intended, either, to disclose her purpose to her son, but Fred lay in wait for her after breakfast and asked her with something rather sheepish in his expression if she was thinking of calling on Mrs. O'Keefe, and, when she hesitated, said, "I may as well stroll down with you if you are going." So it was arranged that they should go together in half-an-hour's time, and Mrs. Prentice retired to set on foot the domestic enterprises of the day with some-

thing to think about in the intervals of her "ordering." Could it be possible that there was more in Fred's desire to accompany her on a visit to Mrs. O'Keefe than the mere pleasure of his mother's society? Experience reminded her that he was not as a rule over-anxious to accompany her on her expeditions, and more frequently than not excused himself from so doing when invited. The entrance of a gratifying idea into her mind took away discomfort from that reminder. He certainly seemed very desirous of seeing Mrs. O'Keefe. Was it possible that he had already fallen a victim to her charms, which even Mrs. Prentice admitted to be of no mean order? Odd, that such a possibility had never yet entered her mind! Possibly because of Mrs. O'Keefe's widowhood. But after all she was quite young still, a year or two younger than Fred himself. She must be well off, from the way in which she lived. She was beautiful and well-born. The Honourable Mrs. Frederick Prentice! It would certainly sound well. By the bye, would she still be the Honourable, if she married again? Mrs. Prentice was not sure, but could easily find out. A pity if it were not so, but even if not the advantages would be great. Truly this was a gratifying subject for reflection, where reflection on other developments of the moment were beginning to be somewhat depressing, in spite of apparent success. So Mrs. Prentice got through her ordering as quickly as possible, and turned these thoughts over in her mind as she put on her hat and coat in her bedroom, and then went down into the hall where Fred was impatiently waiting, determined to use her eyes and ears to advantage.

Nothing of course was further from her intention at present than to let Fred see that her eyes were opened. She talked in quite an ordinary manner of Mrs. O'Keefe as they walked together the few yards that divided the gate of the Vicarage from the front door of the Street House on the

other side of the road, but from Fred's mode of answering her, offhand as it was, gathered enough even in that short space to confirm her suspicions. "I think we will ask Mrs. O'Keefe to dine with us to-night," she said, as they stood waiting for admission, and Fred's "Yes, do, mother!" was quite what she had expected.

The door was opened by Bridget, Mrs. O'Keefe's elderly Irish cook-housekeeper. She gazed at Mrs. Prentice with a broad wooden face, and did not respond to that lady's affable smile as she said, "Good-morning, Bridget. Is your mistress at home?"

"Not at home," replied Bridget.

Mrs. Prentice was a little taken aback. The unpleasant thought crossed her mind that Mrs. O'Keefe might even now be on her way to the White House, and that her early visit ought to have been still earlier.

"Gone out already?" she said. "Dear me! I particularly wanted to see her. Will she be long, Bridget? I might wait ——"

"Not at home," repeated Bridget, with the same expression, or lack of it.

The shadow of another unpleasant thought just crossed Mrs. Prentice's mind. But that was impossible.

"Where has she gone and how long will she be?" she asked, more peremptorily.

Bridget's face broke into meaning. "She's gone nowhere," she said; "but she's not at home. Shure, in high society that's understood well enough, and I'd have nothing else to say if you were to keep me here all day, Mrs. Prentice, ma'am."

Then the impossible had happened. But no, it must be the woman's stupidity. Mrs. Prentice summoned another smile. "I see," she said. "Your mistress is tired after her journey and does not wish to see visitors. You are quite

right, Bridget, to shield her from intrusion. But just go and tell her, my good woman, that Mrs. Prentice would like to see her for a few minutes—and Mr. Frederick Prentice. I am sure your orders do not extend to me."

Bridget still stood immovable at the door. "Shure, nothing was said about young Mr. Prentice," she said. "He's welcome to come in if he likes. But 'I'm not at home to Mrs. Prentice if she calls, Bridget, and tell the other maids so,' was the orders I received, and the orders I'll follow, sugar or vinegar."

The exact meaning of the final qualification escaped Mrs. Prentice in the consternation produced by what had preceded it. "There must be some mistake," she said, after drawing herself up in offended dignity, and glaring at Bridget. "I shall write to Mrs. O'Keefe," and she turned on her heel.

Bridget was not in the least subdued by her manner. "Won't you come in now?" she said to Fred. "The mistress is in the garden."

Mrs. Prentice turned round. "You had better go in, I think, Fred," she said, "and just explain what has happened. It is of no use my doing anything more in face of this woman's stupidity. I shall certainly complain to Mrs. O'Keefe of it."

"Thank you for nothing, ma'am," said Bridget cheerfully, as she stood aside to give entrance to Fred. "Cats must scratch and moles burrow. Step in here, yer honour, and I'll tell the mistress."

Fred was left alone for five minutes or so in the little room just off the hall into which he had been shown. His mind was somewhat disturbed, but it was more with annoyance against his mother than anything. Of course Mrs. O'Keefe, as the intimate friend of the Redcliffes that she had acknowledged herself to him, would take their side in

the present crisis, and he could well believe, both from what he knew of her and from what she had told him, that his mother had so behaved that it was impossible for any one who did sympathize with Mrs. Redcliffe, to do anything but refuse parley with her altogether. It was very annoying that it should have happened thus just at this particular time, but it was fortunate, at any rate, that the refusal did not at present extend to him. He would have to be very careful to use this rather questionable opportunity to advantage, for if he failed to do so it might be difficult to secure another.

He gave himself up, so far as the fluttering of expectation in his heart would allow him, to an eager inspection of the room. He was in one of the chapels of the goddess's temple, a chapel sacred to her more homely occupations. It was the cosiest of little chapels. A basket of needlework stood by an easy-chair on one side of the bright fire, and another easy-chair stood on the other side, the two together suggesting a delightful picture of intimacy, in which the lady was represented at her sewing and a friend, happily ensconced, talking to her and watching her face bent over her work. Here were her books, many of them beautifully bound—she read poetry—good poetry—her writing-table, crowded with silver knick-knacks. A useful little room, not furnished in the main with an eye to effect, but pretty all the same, and with evidences not only of taste but of some wealth. It was crowded with photographs, photographs of the sort of people with whom Fred liked best to be associated and with whom he considered himself most at home, some of the women in Court finery, many of the men—the photographs of men were a little too numerous to please him altogether—in uniform. The one in a big tortoise-shell and silver frame on the writing-table of a young man in the frock coat and undress cap of the Guards must be her husband. A very smart and good-looking young man, with fair hair, and eyes that could only have been blue, he

looked out into the world as if nothing could have been further removed from him than a grave on the lonely veldt, and, within a few paces, the great darkness standing like a wall across the sunny road of his life.

Fred turned away from the picture, and just then Norah O'Keefe came into the room. She shook hands with him, smiling, but it was plain that she was embarrassed. "Here is the sovereign you so kindly lent me," she said. "And I am so very much obliged to you. I should have sent it up this morning."

"I hope you don't think I came here for that," said Fred, smiling at her in return.

She became grave. "I hope Bridget was not rude to Mrs. Prentice," she said. "I should be sorry for that; but I dare say you have heard something of what has been happening here. I only did last night, or I should have warned you yesterday that I could not possibly remain friends with Mrs. Prentice. I could not even have her in my house."

She stood in front of him, looking into his eyes. He dropped his own. "I'm afraid," he said, "that my mother feels rather strongly about the Redcliffes," and would have said more but she broke in —

"Oh, it is much more than that. She has behaved abominably. I must say it, even to you. If it had not been for her, no one would have thought anything of this at all. She is doing her best to set everybody against Mrs. Redcliffe; and the only thing left for that dear woman's friends—those who stand by her, and they wouldn't be worth calling friends if they didn't show now how much they love and respect her—is to have nothing at all to do with Mrs. Prentice till she comes to her senses. That is what I am going to do anyhow. I will not even bow to her when I meet her. I feel hot with indignation when I think of what she is doing."

Fred stole a look at her face. It seemed to him more beautiful than ever in its earnestness. But he felt very uncomfortable, not knowing how far she intended to include him in her sentence of enmity, for she had been so carried away by her indignation that it had seemed as if he had been standing there to receive it.

"I'm very sorry about it all," he said. "Of course, I think mother is very wrong; and my father thinks so too, you know, only he doesn't seem to be able to do anything with her at present. She'll come round, you know. She always does in time."

"And in the meantime, dear Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda too are to be run down and their lives made miserable to them. Oh, it is dreadful! I wouldn't have believed that any nice woman could have behaved in that way."

"At any rate, Mrs. O'Keefe, neither my father nor I take the line that my mother does."

"I believe Mr. Prentice has been kind about it. I haven't heard anything from Mrs. Redcliffe herself, though I did go up to see her last night. I shouldn't care to discuss it with her unless she wanted to; I would much rather show her that it is all nothing to me, that I love her all the more because she is passing through trouble and anxiety. I don't want the horrible unkindness to throw its shadow over our friendship. But Bridget, my maid, has told me a great deal. She is trustworthy and keeps her eyes and ears open. She said that the Vicar had been up to see Mrs. Redcliffe, and that he had talked to her as they were going into church on Sunday, while Mrs. Prentice walked on with her head in the air. I ought not to be talking to you like this about your mother, I suppose, but I am not going to try and hide my feelings. I feel very angry with her, and indeed I will not hide it."

"I hope you don't feel angry with me," Fred ventured to say. They had been standing opposite to one another during

the foregoing conversation, and it was not even now clear whether she regarded him as a friend or an enemy.

She looked at him with eyes in which for the first time there was a sign of interest. "We may as well sit down," she said. "No, I don't feel angry with you. But I should if I thought you agreed with Mrs. Prentice in what she is doing. But I am sure you can't. I won't do you that injustice. They are friends of yours, are they not? The most intimate friends you have here."

"Yes, I suppose they are." He turned his cap in his hands and bent his eyes on the carpet uneasily.

Norah O'Keefe looked at him with eyes that were questioning and a trifle impatient. "Then what are you going to do?" she asked.

He looked up at her. "Do?" he repeated. "What can I do?"

"What I should have thought any sincere friend would have done in a case like this. That would be to take the very first opportunity of going to the White House and showing that he *was* a friend. That is what Mr. Browne and Captain Turner both did directly they heard of it, and I honour them for it."

An unpleasant remembrance came to Fred's mind of Browne and Turner sparring together over this lady, who was now singing their praises in return. The impudence of the self-satisfied, middle-aged male! At any rate he was not going to be behind them in a matter of generosity, if it was generosity she wanted for the moment.

"I don't see how they could have done less," he said, "and, of course, I'm going to do the same. But, you know, my position is a little different to theirs. I think my mother is wrong, but I can't very well say so to Mrs. Redcliffe."

"Why not, Mr. Prentice? You have said it to me. You are quite right to say it."

"Well, that's rather different."

"I really don't see it. It isn't of much importance what you say to me, but it is of great importance what you say to them. And you knew them so well. Why, Hilda and you are the greatest friends, aren't you?"

There was a challenge in her question. He answered it as best he could. "Yes, we have always been good friends," he said. "Of course she is a good deal younger than I am. I have known her ever since she was in short frocks."

"I don't think any man—any young man, could have a better friend than Hilda Redcliffe. She is true to the very bottom of her heart. She is a splendid girl. Oh, Mr. Prentice, surely you'll go now, at once, and make them feel that nothing is altered because of this. Every minute you delay takes away from the effect of your going; and they do want their friends around them now."

"Yes, I'll go," he said. He paused a moment and then rose. "I'll go now; and may I come back and tell you how I have got on?"

She rose too, and looked at him hesitatingly, almost distrustfully. "I think—wouldn't it be better," she said slowly, "if you didn't come to see me until—well, until I am able to be friends with your mother again? I should be glad to see you, of course, but ——"

"Then, if you would be glad to see me, I shall come," he said boldly. "And as for my mother, I shall be able to turn her. I believe I have more influence over her than anybody."

"I hope you will succeed. It is terrible that there should be this division amongst us. We have always got on well together here. But things seem to have changed altogether while I have been away. Well, good-bye, Mr. Prentice. I am sure your going up to the White House now will give them both a great deal of pleasure. I am glad you are going."

She accompanied him to the door, talking all the time, and

shut it with a final good-bye, before he had time to say again that he was coming back. He walked down the village and up to the White House in no very equable frame of mind. What a confounded nuisance it was, that while under ordinary circumstances he would have been able to see a great deal of her in the most friendly and natural way, this disturbance had come to cut her off from him, and make her approachable only by efforts on his part which it would require some pains to make. And he had made no headway towards further intimacy at all. She had been taken up with the affairs of her friends, and had treated him only as a means of helping on their interests. Bother the Redcliffes !

But how beautiful she had been in her outspoken loyalty and indignation ! He might have travelled alone with her as he had done yesterday every day for a week, and she would not have shown him so much of her character as she had done during the short interview he had just had with her. He was not the ordinary young fool who was content to chatter aimlessly with a pretty woman, basking in the warmth of her beauty and charm, without wanting to go deeper. Beauty of character, he told himself, was even more to him than beauty of face and form, and quite believed that if Norah O'Keefe had been far less beautiful than she was, he would yet have fallen deeply in love with her. She was inspiring. She would help a lover to climb to higher altitudes than he was capable of mounting by himself. Oh, that he and she might scale the dizzy crags of life, walking hand in hand along the easier slopes, cutting steps together up the frozen walls, and bound always to one another by the strong rope of love ! He would make himself worthy of her. It would be easy work with such an inspiration. In fact there would be nothing to do but just to think of her. Once more he trod on air, and so treading came to the White House and went in.

Hilda was in the smaller sitting-room, arranging flower-

vases. She could not have escaped him if she would, for there was no way out of the inner room but through the larger parlour into which he was shown, and the door was open between the two rooms. But she had no special wish to escape him, although his visit gave her no pleasure. Neither he nor his affairs had been much in her mind of late, and he was too closely allied to the enemy to be received without suspicion. But he must be given a chance, like the rest of the world, to clear himself of that suspicion, so she left her flower table in the inner room and came out to him, with the question in her eyes that was always there now when she met those who had not yet declared themselves.

"Oh, how do you do?" she said. "I won't shake hands, because mine are wet and rather dirty."

It was a pity that he could not shake hands. He might have put some warmth into that simple act. For the life of him he could put none into his spoken greeting although he tried hard. "I only came down last night," he said. "I hope you and Mrs. Redcliffe are all right, Hilda."

His eyes dropped, and her face hardened. "We are all right in health, thank you," she said; "otherwise, we are not all right. I suppose you know that?"

"I have heard something," he stammered, without meeting her gaze. "And I am very sorry for it."

"Sorry for what?" she demanded.

He had an impulse of irritation and looked up. "Sorry for the fuss that is being made about nothing," he said.

She was not appeased, although there was nothing she could take hold of in his actual words. But could he have spoken like that if he had really been on their side—hers and her mother's? Turner had not spoken like that, nor even Browne. And Norah O'Keefe—she had just come into the room and thrown her arms around their necks. There had been no need to ask her for what she was sorry.

"It isn't exactly nothing to us," she said; "and as for the fuss that is being made—a better word would be wickedness."

Again he felt annoyed. Why should he stand still to be addressed in this way when he had only come with good intentions, and out of pure generosity of heart?

"You can hardly expect me to take quite that view, Hilda," he said, "considering that it is my mother who——"

"Then, if you don't take that view," she flamed out at him, "why do you come here at all? It is an insult that you should come near us."

"I came because I wanted you to know that—that I don't agree with my mother, in—in what she says. I came out of friendship. But if you think my coming is an insult——"

"You would have kept away. I wish you had kept away. Everything you say makes it worse. You don't agree with your mother! How very kind of you! We are still to be allowed to bask in your patronage then, as long as we behave ourselves!"

The concentrated scorn and bitterness in her young voice and on her face might have moved him to some feeling other than resentment, if his conscience had been clearer. But this was the girl whom he had last parted from as her all but confessed lover, and his desertion of her, although she did not yet know of it, lay between them, and must have prevented his saying anything that could satisfy her, whatever he had said.

Mrs. Redcliffe came into the room before he could reply. "Here is Fred, mother," said Hilda contemptuously, "come to say that he doesn't quite agree with *everything* that Mrs Prentice is saying and doing at present."

"Hilda has flown at me like a tiger," said Fred, "for having the impudence, as she calls it, to come here at all. I only came to see you, as soon as ever I could, Mrs. Redcliffe, to

tell you how sorry I am about this, and—and I hope it will make no difference in our friendship."

Mrs. Redcliffe sat down on the sofa. She was beginning to feel the effect of these constantly recurring discussions, and this one did not promise to yield much satisfaction.

"I am afraid it is bound to make some difference, Fred," she said, "though it is kind of you to come. Your mother would not care for you to be here so often as you used to be, and I should be sorry to give her occasion for further hostility. So I am afraid we must be content not to see much of each other at present."

Fred was afraid, too, that it must be so. Of course, he thought his mother was in the wrong, but Mrs. Redcliffe would see that he could not go against her altogether; that is, he would do what he could to bring about a better understanding, but—but he could not do what Mrs. O'Keefe, for instance, had done and—well, send her to Coventry.

Thus, stammeringly and ending with a sort of shamefaced jocularity, Mr. Frederick Prentice, altogether relieved in his mind that it should be understood that he was not to come to the White House again, but anxious to avoid all blame in keeping away. Mrs. Redcliffe listened to him, not without some signs of mild surprise, her eyes on his face; and Hilda also kept her eyes on his face, her brows bent and the little vertical line between them becoming more pronounced as he stumbled through his speech. Then she spoke.

"How do you know," she said sharply, "that Mrs. O'Keefe has sent Mrs. Prentice to Coventry, as you call it?"

"Because we went to see her this morning and she had given orders that she was not at home to my mother. It was explained to her by the servant without any hesitation."

A gleam of satisfaction passed across Hilda's face, but it was quickly overshad wed. "There is no doubt about our real friends," she said. "Then Mrs. Prentice took the very

first opportunity after Mrs. O'Keefe's coming home, to go and poison her mind against us, or to try to, for she wouldn't have succeeded. How like her! And you went with her, knowing what she was going to do."

"I—I shouldn't have let her say anything against Mrs. Redcliffe."

Hilda turned away. "I've got nothing more to say to you," she said, and then turned round again quickly and added, "and I hope I never shall have." Then she went into the inner room.

Mrs. Redcliffe rose. "Good-bye, Fred," she said, holding out her hand. "I am sure you meant kindly in coming, but I don't quite understand why you came."

Fred stammered something inaudible and went out. He struck the gravel with his stick as he went down the drive. "Why on earth did I go?" he said angrily. "That girl is turning into a vixen. It's a lucky escape."

Mrs. Redcliffe went in to her daughter. "That's all over," said Hilda, turning to her. "Mother, I would never have said one friendly word to Fred Prentice if I had known what he really was. I did know he was idle and selfish, but I never thought he was so mean and poor-spirited as he has shown himself. He is worse than his mother, for she *has* got the excuse of her horrid nature. Oh, mother, when will it all end?"

She broke into a passion of tears and threw herself into her mother's arms. Mrs. Redcliffe soothed her, but it was not till long after that she was calm again. There was that in the minds of both of them that could not be put into words, but as she sobbed out her distress at her mother's knee, both of them knew that a line had been drawn across a chapter of her life in which much more might have been written.

Fred Prentice walked quickly down to the village, throwing

off the unpleasant memories of his late performance as he went, and rang again at the porch of Street House. But he was told that Mrs. O'Keefe had driven out and would not be back before luncheon, and went home once more a prey to acute discomfort of mind.

CHAPTER XXII

THREE MEN AND A LADY

Maximilian Browne rose early on that Saturday morning and took a cold bath, after a steady half-hour's manipulation of an elastic exerciser. He went down to breakfast as the clock struck eight, feeling himself every inch a man. After breakfast he lit a pipe and inspected his stables and garden. "That's the way to live, Sally," he said to the fox-terrier that accompanied him, and showed the liveliest interest in his confidences. "I've been getting slack lately. Hot baths and cigarettes before breakfast, and breakfast at nine o'clock or later—it plays the deuce and all. If I keep this up, as I mean to, I shall take off a stone in no time. And by George, it makes you feel fit, don't it?"

He stretched his arms and yawned. "Come and sit down on a seat, Sally," he went on. "We've got an hour before we need go to the office. We'll see how we stand."

It was a sunny May morning, and Browne brought out a comfortable basket-chair and ensconced himself under a blossoming apple tree on the lawn. Sally jumped upon his lap.

"Now, then, little dog, we've made up our minds, haven't we?" he said, caressing her shoulders with a large hand and jerking his face away from her tongue. "Chuck it, Sally. If you don't keep quiet I shan't talk of anything. Well, we're not going to play the fool any longer. We don't want to get married. We're very well off as we are. And if we don't want to get married, Sally, what's the good of hanging about—you know what I mean—and spoiling the chances of people who do? Of course she's a very pretty lady, Sally. You know that as well as I do. Still, we've done very well

without her for the last month, and we'll go on doing without her, eh? Nothing simpler, Sally. We'll get up early every morning and do a good day's work—get down to the office at half-past nine sharp, hack about and sweat the weight off in the afternoon all through the summer, read some'ing pretty stiff for an hour after dinner, so's to rub up our brains a bit. Not the sort of rubbish Turner reads. We'll have a go at Horace, I think, Sally—with a crib. Used to be pretty good at Horace at school. Jupiter and Mæcenas, Sally, and all those old fellows. Then we'll go to bed early and sleep like tops. We'll save a bit of money; perhaps we might look out for a pupil or two, and buy a good weight carrier for the winter. It ain't a bad life, Sally, and —— Hulloa! going to sleep? Well, you're a nice sort o' girl to tell things to. What's the time? Quarter to nine. Now, yesterday we were only just thinking of getting up. Makes you feel a bit slack at first, getting up early, doesn't it?"

There was silence for an hour while man and dog slumbered peacefully. The flickering shadows played over them, and the breeze stroked them lightly, scattering pink blossoms.

Browne awoke with a start and dropped the dog from his lap. "By Jove, a quarter to ten!" he exclaimed. "What the deuce!" He hurried round to the stable and ordered out his cart. "Meant to walk," he said, "but I'm a bit late."

He drove down to his office and busied himself in affairs. About eleven o'clock his clerk came in with a note. "From Mrs. O'Keefe," he said. Browne's pink face grew a shade pinker as he opened it. "Oh, she's come back, has she?" he said, in elaborate innocence.

The note enclosed a cheque for a quarter's rent, and apologized for its being overdue. Browne endorsed the cheque and handed it over.

"Shall I send the receipt round?" asked the clerk.

"Yes. No, I may as well take it myself. I'm going that way—to the Lodge. Get it ready and I'll sign it."

A little later Browne knocked at the door of Street House, and learnt that Mrs. O'Keefe had driven out and would not be back before luncheon. "Well, I'll leave this," he said. "And you might tell Mrs. O'Keefe that I'll drop in and see her about tea-time." Then he made his way to the Lodge, where sundry repairs were in progress. The estate foreman said afterwards that he must have got out of bed the wrong side that morning.

Captain Thomas Turner was lying in bed at that very time, not feeling at all well. He had sat up until long past daylight deeply absorbed in a masterpiece by one of his favourite novelists, who carried his romances to unusual lengths, and had demanded the incense of nearly two ounces of tobacco and a corresponding libation of whisky before he finally extricated his characters from the appalling vicissitudes through which he had led them. Captain Turner felt that he had passed through a great strain, and groaned frequently as he crept out of bed and went through a slow but incomplete toilet.

"Shave when I feel a little better," he said to himself, and went down-stairs in a Norfolk jacket and with a scarf round his neck. He sat out in the sunshine while his breakfast was being prepared, gathering strength as the cool breezes played round his forehead.

"This won't do, you know," he said aloud to himself. "It's a rotten life. Nobody to talk to and take you out of yourself, and sitting up all night smoking and drinking and using your brain when you ought to be in bed. It's all very well, but you begin to feel it as you grow older. A man oughtn't to live alone when he gets past forty. Never felt that so strongly before."

He sat immersed in thought for some time. Then he raised his eyes and looked down the pleasant valley, but without see-

ing anything that lay before him. "I've a jolly good mind to try my luck," he said.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" said the neat maid who came out of the house at this moment. "Oh, beg pardon. Breakfast is ready, sir."

Turner ate his breakfast, thinking hard the while. Disjointed sentences fell from his lips from time to time. "Why shouldn't I? . . . I've got plenty of money, and I'd alter the house if she wanted it. . . . Have to keep that old fool, Browne, out of the way. . . . S'pose he'd laugh, but I shouldn't mind that."

When he had finished breakfast he stood for a time beside the window. "Have to see her," he said. "Couldn't do it in writing. . . . Might send a note and say I'm coming this afternoon. . . . Matter of importance—to see you on a question of great importance—question of—matter of great importance. . . . H'm! Perhaps better leave it alone. . . . No; I'll go through with it. . . . Can only say no. . . . Can't bite me. . . . Don't be a funk, Turner."

He sat down at a writing-table with determination and scribbled a note, re-read it and fastened it up in an envelope. Then with the same resolute bearing went out to where Robert Kitcher was working in the garden.

"Take this down at once to Mrs. O'Keefe," he said, "and wait for an answer." And, as he turned away, in the same tone, "Well, I've done it. Can't get out of it now."

Robert Kitcher, as he rode down to the village, had something to think about. "Well, she's a nice lady," was the end of his cogitation. "But blowed if I ever thought he'd 'a' had the pluck. Bring her own man up to look arter the haarses, I s'pose. And a good job too. I hate the dratted things. Hold up, can't yer! Give me cabbages."

The note having been despatched, Turner fell a prey to

dreadful misgivings, and would have liked to recall it. When the messenger came back and told him that the lady would not be back before luncheon-time, he felt relief, and his resolution tottered. But, reflecting that he was a man of honour, and his word was as good as pledged, he braced himself anew to his ordeal and went through the rest of the morning and early afternoon in alternate fits of determination and dull apathy; his headache had gone by four o'clock, and he dressed himself carefully and set out, watched with respectful interest by his two women servants from an upper window, for whose benefit Robert Kitcher from the back seat of the cart made motions expressive of throwing rice, which caused them some amusement at the time, although it was not until he had explained his action later that they really laughed.

It is possible, although not probable, that Norah O'Keefe had not divined from Turner's preparatory note what the matter of importance, on which he wished to address her, was. And it is possible that she may have made up her mind to get it over and have done with it. It is also possible that she may have wished to escape it for the time by running away, but had been prevented from doing so. At any rate, when Turner applied for admission, his knees knocking together and an earnest determination sitting on his mind to take "no" for an answer to the question he had rashly pledged himself to ask as soon as it was offered to him, he was admitted to the lady's presence. But—and this may have been the reason why Mrs. O'Keefe was not drinking tea elsewhere that afternoon—sitting by the side of her table and consuming a crumpet sat Maximilian Browne.

The sight of the object of his morning's reflections, more fresh and blooming even than his imagination had pictured her, and his rival in such close juxtaposition, instantly changed the current of his thoughts again, and he glared at the intruder malevolently as he shook hands with his hostess.

"Might have known I should find you here," he said, when he had taken a chair. "Regular tea-table fellow, you are."

"What about you, then?" retorted Browne. "Here you are at Mrs. O'Keefe's tea-table, and a very good tea-table it is."

"Thank you, Mr. Browne," said Norah, laughing. "Now you are not to begin to quarrel the moment you come here. You never do it anywhere else, and it is no compliment to me."

"He's such a jealous fellow," said Turner. "Can't bear anybody to have a look in anywhere but himself."

"You're a fool," said Browne brilliantly. "Well, as I was saying, Mrs. O'Keefe, I think you'd better call on Lady Wrotham as soon as possible. Then perhaps you'll be able to put things straight a bit."

"Don't you call on her, Mrs. O'Keefe," put in Turner. "She's a domineering, scandal-mongering old busybody. I suppose Browne has been keeping dark what has happened since you've been away."

"Oh, no," said Norah. "I know everything, and I am very angry about it. Most angry, of course, with Mrs. Prentice."

"There's nothing to be said for her," said Browne.

"And there's nothing to be said for Lady Wrotham," added Turner. "She first put it about."

"That's what I think," said Norah. "And really, Mr. Browne, I don't feel inclined to go and see her."

Browne grew pinker. "But look here," he said. "It'll be perfectly awful if there's going to be trouble all round. You must meet Lady Wrotham some time or other, Mrs. O'Keefe. You can't live a hundred yards off her without, and it will be frightfully awkward for everybody if——"

"Rot and rubbish!" exclaimed Turner. "If she comes down here and starts setting everybody by the ears, she's got

to put up with the awkwardness. Fact is, you're so doosid afraid o' getting a wigging from her that you want everybody to go and tumble down at her feet. You got me to go, and ——"

"And a lot of tumbling at her feet you did! She won't want to see you again."

"She wouldn't if she did. I've had enough of her to last me my lifetime, or till the end of my lease, when I dare say she'll order you to turn me out, and you'll do it. I'm not going to sit in a lady's drawing-room and hear her going for my friends without telling her what I think of it. Mrs. Redcliffe's worth a hundred of her, and you'd have told her so yourself if you'd had the pluck of a mouse."

"I did as good as tell her so. You know that as well as I do. I'm just as much for Mrs. Redcliffe as you are."

"There is not the slightest need to quarrel about that," said Norah hastily, anxious to forestall further reprisals. "You both of you behaved just as one would have expected you to behave. But I tell you candidly, Mr. Browne, that if I did call on Lady Wrotham, I should tell her, just as Captain Turner did, what I think of this persecution of dear Mrs. Redcliffe."

"You wouldn't be as rude as he was," said Browne. "And there'd be no necessity. I believe, if you told her what everybody thinks of Mrs. Redcliffe, she'd listen to you, and you might do a lot of good. It's all very well, but if she only gets her ideas from Mrs. Prentice—well, I think it's hardly fair on Mrs. Redcliffe. And Turner and I didn't do much. He was too rude, and I was ——"

"Too much of a funk," put in Turner. "Don't you go, Mrs. O'Keefe. We don't want the old lady. We got on very well without her, and now we've no need to pretend to put up with the Prentice woman any longer, we'll get on better still."

"I think I will go," said Norah thoughtfully. "I'll see what I can do. I'm not afraid of her, at any rate."

"Browne is," said Turner. "Oh, good heavens, why couldn't we have been left alone?"

When tea was over Turner sat on and looked vindictively at Browne, and Browne sat on and looked suspiciously at Turner, while Norah tried to keep the ball of conversation rolling, but without any great success.

At last Browne made a move. "Well, I suppose I must be off," he said. "Coming up with me, Turner?"

"No," replied Turner. "Good-bye, if you must be going."

Browne sat on. Norah sprang up, unable to support the tension any longer. "Let us go into the garden," she said. "There is nothing to see, but it is a lovely evening."

She led the way through the open French windows. Browne made as if to follow her. "Why the devil can't you go, if you want to?" said Turner in a fierce whisper.

Browne looked at him with intelligence. "I'll go when you do," he said, also in a whisper.

Just at that moment the door opened and Mr. Frederick Prentice was announced.

He came in with a look that might have been described as sheepish, and when he saw the other two men that epithet fitted his appearance still more accurately. Norah came back from the window blushing, although she was angry with herself when she felt her face growing warm. Browne stared, and Turner muttered something short and expressive of his feelings.

Fred and Norah shook hands, both in some confusion, and then she offered him some tea, which he accepted and drank, striving to talk and appear at his ease, in which he was not very successful, and the other two resumed their seats and sat glumly.

Norah's spirits revived and she suddenly laughed. "I forgot to introduce you," she said. "Captain Turner and Mr. Browne; Mr. Prentice."

Fred laughed too, awkwardly. "Knew them both before Browne went bald and Turner grey," he said, not very happily. "And they knew me——"

"When you were only a cub and not a puppy," interrupted Turner. "Look here, we've been talking about Mrs. Redcliffe. We're all her friends here. How do you stand? That's what I'd like to know."

His roughness acted like a tonic on Fred. He eyed him coolly. "I've come to talk to Mrs. O'Keefe about that," he said; "but I don't know that I've got anything to say to you."

"You went up to see Mrs. Redcliffe this morning, didn't you, Mr. Prentice?" Norah struck in.

"Yes, I did. I'll tell you about it—afterwards."

His implied intention of sitting out Browne and Turner caused Norah to say hurriedly, "Oh, tell me now, please. I haven't got much time to spare. I have a lot of letters to write."

"I went," he said, after a reluctant pause. "But—but—well, Mrs. Redcliffe thanked me for coming, but Hilda—I didn't get on so well with her. She seemed really to want to make an enemy of me. I don't know why, because—because—it was rather a difficult thing to do—I wanted to let them see that I didn't agree with my mother, but—I think unless I had been prepared to call her all sorts of names, which I'm really not quite prepared to do—to an outsider—I mean that nothing less than that would have satisfied her."

"Quite right too," said Turner. "She's a trump, that girl."

Fred looked at him. "I dare say it seems quite natural to you, Turner," he said, "that a man should be ready to hear

his mother called names, and even to call her names himself. It seems to me that when he has said he thinks she is in the wrong, and he's sorry for it, it ought to be enough. I hope Mrs. O'Keefe thinks so too."

He spoke with some dignity, and Norah O'Keefe felt a quick sympathy for him. "Oh, yes," she said. "You couldn't do more than that. And of course your position is a difficult one."

"Jolly difficult," said Turner. "Hunting with the hounds and running with the hare always is. I'm quite content to take Miss Hilda's view. If you couldn't satisfy her, after making eyes at her for years, you won't satisfy the rest of us."

"I can't see why you shouldn't keep out of it altogether," said Browne. "You are hardly ever here, and it isn't your business."

"It's just as much mine as yours," said Fred angrily, "only it's more difficult for me."

"Of course it is difficult," said Norah.

Turner was not to be suppressed. "The thing's perfectly simple," he said. "There are two parties in Exton now. One of them is Mrs. Prentice and Lady Wrotham, and the other is all the rest of us. There's no getting over that. If you think your place is by your mother, as I dare say it is—well, stick to it."

Fred shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "I've nothing more to say," he said.

"I'm afraid our quarrelling amongst ourselves won't help dear Mrs. Redcliffe," said Norah.

"I don't want to quarrel," said Fred, "only Turner seems determined to make me. I came to talk to you, Mrs. O'Keefe. Perhaps I had better come to-morrow."

Browne got up from his chair. "Good-bye, Mrs. O'Keefe," he said, shook hands and went out.

"I'd got something to say to you too," said Turner; "but

I suppose I must make a move now this conquering hero has come on to the scene."

"I am afraid you must both make a move," said Norah. "I have a great many letters that I *must* write for to-night's post, and unless I begin now I shan't get them done." She stood up behind her table, and there was nothing for her two remaining visitors but to take their leave. Fred had not been in the room ten minutes, and was not pleased at being thus dismissed. His displeasure vented itself upon Turner when they found themselves out in the road together. "The cheek," he said, "of two old fogies like you and Browne worrying a woman like that with your ridiculous attentions."

Turner looked at him. "You're not only a conceited puppy," he said—"you're a cur," and got up into his cart, leaving Fred with the uncomfortable conviction that his defection had already become known to the world, and that his new pursuit would also now provide food for gossip.

"Young cad!" said Turner, driving off. "Chucked off a girl in a thousand like an old glove and poking his nose in here where he's not wanted. Think I'll go up and see Browne. He's a fool, but he's an honest fool."

It was significant of the understanding existing between these two queer characters that they should meet again now without the slightest awkwardness arising out of their late encounter. They talked over the new development in the general situation, and were united in their strictures on Fred Prentice, agreeing that he had behaved atrociously, and should get the punishment he deserved if they could by any means bring it about. That he should have fallen in love with Norah O'Keefe, as it was plain to both of them that he had done, was characterized as a piece of infernal impudence, and roused them both to fury. But both of them expressed the conviction that she wouldn't have anything to say to him, and when she found it out, would send him about his business

pretty quick. It did not occur to them that what was perfectly plain to them might possibly have been already divined by her, but they agreed that she would certainly have nothing to do with him.

"By the bye," said Browne, "why were you so anxious to get her alone this afternoon? Had you made up your mind to get it out at last?"

"Look here, Maximilian Browne," replied Turner impressively, "when I propose to Mrs. O'Keefe—for I suppose that's what you're driving at, though you never say anything straight—you may ask me to go down on my hands and knees in front of Lady Wrotham and I'll do it. I like Mrs. O'Keefe, and I'm quite ready to have a little quiet talk with her occasionally—when you'll let me; but as for marrying her, I've no more idea of marrying her than I have of marrying—er—anybody, and never have had. So let's have an end of this nonsense."

Then they played Picquet together, and Turner stayed to dinner. He got home about eleven o'clock, read a novel and went to bed at three. As he laid his head on the pillow he said, "If I hadn't been very careful and kept a strong hold over myself to-day, I should have been in the soup."

CHAPTER XXIII

CHURCH, AND AFTER

THE Sunday which followed Mrs. Prentice's rejection at the door of Mrs. O'Keefe produced a crisis in the religious feud set on foot by Lady Wrotham.

It fell in this wise. The Vicar had decreed some time before that on this particular Sunday the congregation at the choral mass would be enlarged by the presence of such of the school children whose parents should not object. Somehow, this intelligence had escaped Lady Wrotham, probably because no parents had objected, the villagers on the whole taking their spiritual sustenance without questioning the form in which it was offered them, and confining their parental duties to instructing their children to do as they were told; and those who were willing to follow Lady Wrotham's lead and harry the Vicar not having grasped the fact that this particular service would come under her ban. She heard of it only on rising on the day on which this great insult to her opinions and authority was to be offered, and she was furious.

"I will not have it, *I will not have it*," she said to her maid, who had given her the information. "Send at once to Mr. Petty, Riddell, and ask him to be good enough to come and see me at nine o'clock punctually."

Mr. Petty, the schoolmaster, presented himself at the time appointed. He was also the organist, and one of the Vicar's staunchest adherents, agreeing with everything he did, and only anxious that he should go to the utmost limits that the Church, in which he himself secretly aspired to be a vicar

some day, would allow. Mr. Petty was respectful, but there was no help to be obtained from him.

"I have nothing to do with the Sunday-school, my lady," he said, in answer to a peremptory order to countermand the instructions already given. "I do not even teach in it. The Vicar is solely responsible."

"Oh!" said Lady Wrotham. "But they are the same children that come to your school, are they not, and it is held in the same building?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Could you not have stopped this, Mr. Petty?"

"Certainly not, my lady."

"Perhaps you did not wish to stop it?"

"I should not have wished to stop it, even if I had had the power."

"But don't you think it a very terrible thing that the very children who are under your care during the week should be led away into this shocking and illegal—*and illegal*, Mr. Petty—superstition on the Lord's Day?"

"I do not regard it so, my lady."

"Do I understand that you are at one with Mr. Prentice in desiring that the children should attend mass in a Protestant church?"

"I regard the church as Catholic and not Protestant, my lady, and I am entirely at one with the Vicar in everything he does."

"Then you are not fit to have the care of the children here, Mr. Petty, and I tell you so plainly. Oh, what a nest of corruption it is! But I have no time to talk to you now. I must take steps to stop this last outrage at once. It is done expressly to defy me. But I warn you, Mr. Petty, that I have not done with you yet. I am shocked that you should hold these views and be where you are. I did not think it was possible. You must go now."

Mr. Petty said "Good-morning, my lady," and went, with his private thoughts to keep him company. Lady Wrotham rang the bell.

"I am ready for breakfast," she said, "but I am just going to write a note which must be taken at once to Mrs. Prentice."

Mrs. Prentice, scenting further trouble, answered the summons at once, and was shown into the library, whence Lady Wrotham's breakfast-table was just being removed.

"Mrs. Prentice, what is this?" cried Lady Wrotham. "Why did you not tell me of this new conspiracy?"

Mrs. Prentice blinked with apprehension. "I—er—what is it you refer to, Lady Wrotham?" she said.

"Oh, surely you know. I have just heard—only an hour ago—that the Sunday-school children are to be dragged to this travesty of a service this morning. Oh, it is wicked —*wicked!* And it is all done to show contempt and defiance of my wishes. Why was I not told? You must have known it."

Mrs. Prentice breathed again. "I did," she said; "but I thought you knew it too, Lady Wrotham. It was decided—oh, six weeks ago."

"I did not know it. It has been kept from me. Don't you think I should have used every effort in my power to stop it if I had been aware of what was on foot? Don't you *know* I should? Shouldn't I have relied on you, at any rate, after what you have told me of your change of convictions, to do all *you* could to stop it, and tell me the result? What *have* you done to stop it?"

Mrs. Prentice faltered. "To tell you the truth," she said, "I have had so much to occupy my mind, that I had forgotten it, until my husband mentioned it just now at the breakfast-table. Then I did say something, but, as you know, Lady Wrotham, I have now so little influence over him, that it was

as good as saying nothing. He simply made no answer, and left the room immediately afterwards."

"Of course. He has determined to act in defiance of me, and to show me that he is determined so to act. It is monstrous. But he will see that I can act too. I have been patient too long. Now my patience is at an end. What is the time? Half-past nine. Messengers must be sent round to the children's homes at once to forbid them to come."

"But they assemble at the school at half-past nine and the service commences at a quarter to ten."

"Then a message must be sent to the school. Oh, why did I not know of this in time to act? Of course, Mr. Prentice is in sole command at the school, as I have just learnt from Mr. Petty. He would only defy me further. It is too late to do anything now. The abomination must be committed this once. But it never shall again. I pledge myself to that. And this I say: until this apostasy is stopped, as I will see that it is stopped, I will have nothing to do with a church where such things are done. I will not set foot in it. Mrs. Prentice, I shall drive over to Standon this morning. The clergyman there is a God-fearing man, and a friend of Mr. Dacre's. Will you show the reality of your change, and come with me?"

Surely, Lady Wrotham, if you had thought a moment, you would not have demanded this final subservience. The woman has striven so hard to propitiate you. She is on such terms with her husband that the happiness of her home is likely to be wrecked for ever unless she draws away from your guidance and follows that to which she owes allegiance. Is she to be compelled to put this crowning slight on one whom she has hitherto supported in the poor way best known to her? Is the confidence of husband in wife and of wife in husband nothing that it must be ruthlessly destroyed if you can gain one unwilling convert more? Are you so blind that you can-

not see the miserable scaffolding of vanity and self-deception that upholds those professed convictions which you are proud to have instilled into her, and how worthless those professions are, compared with the wifely loyalty which you are pitilessly breaking down?

No, you cannot see. But perhaps she can. Her life is troubled enough now, and your favour, for which she has given up so much that she is only now beginning to value, has not done much after all to brighten it. What if she breaks away now, under this last weight crowded on to her back, and takes courage to say that she has gone far enough with you, and will go no farther! What would she lose? Would she not rather gain something, at any rate, of her vanished peace of mind, even though you should cast her out for ever from your august presence?

She shrinks mentally, and considers, has a refusal on her lips, considers again and gives in. The spell is too strong. You have gained another victory, Lady Wrotham. You are getting on famously in your endeavours to bring the solace of a true religion to your new home.

Mrs. Prentice repaired to the vicarage to get ready for her expedition. As she walked through the village she said to herself that if the road to Standon from the Abbey had not lain in the other direction, so that they would not have to drive through the main street, she would not have gone; on such small considerations rest momentous decisions, and so readily is the ostrich policy pursued by foreseeing humans.

Fred was at home, smoking and mooning in the garden. To him she briefly announced her intention of accompanying Lady Wrotham to Standon church.

"I say, father won't like that, will he?" he commented.

"I cannot help that," said Mrs. Prentice. "He will not be guided by me, and now Lady Wrotham is so annoyed with him—I think rightly—that she refuses to go to church here at

all. My duty is to do all I can to keep in with her and get matters put on a better footing."

"You're taking a funny way of doing it," said Fred. "I think you're making a great mistake, mother. Still, it's no affair of mine." He turned away. He had other things to think of, and his hopes just now were centred on that very Exton church which his mother was forsaking, for there he might seize opportunities otherwise denied to him.

Lady Wrotham's carriage rolled out of the Gate House and up the hill on its three-mile drive. It was too early for it to be met by the churchgoers coming down to the Abbey, for which Mrs. Prentice was thankful. But of course there were those who saw them and wondered, and even if it had not been so, it is difficult to see what she would have expected to gain from a temporary ignorance of doings which would have spread all over the parish as a matter of course in a few hours' time.

It is not necessary to follow the conversation of the two ladies on their drive to the queer little brick box of a church whither they were bound. Their arrival made some stir and rather put out the white-haired old clergyman, whose usual congregation was not much more than a score in the body of the building and half as many school children again in a little gallery above it. He preached what Lady Wrotham called a simple gospel sermon, with which she expressed herself edified and uplifted, and, refusing a luncheon invitation from Mrs. Firmin of Standon House, she and Mrs. Prentice drove back to Exton again. One short passage of their conversation on the homeward journey may be repeated.

Mrs. Prentice had made sundry attempts to discover what the great lady's next move was to be, but without success, and at length asked her the question point blank.

"I shall lose no time in writing to the bishop," said Lady Wrotham. "I shall write this afternoon. I have a very

strong case, and I do not think it will be possible for him to ignore it. If he does ——"

Mrs. Prentice waited with growing apprehension for what should come next. But nothing came.

"If he does," she faltered.

"He will not. I have no doubt about that. I was thinking of what might happen after he *had* given his decision. Mr. Prentice is so self-willed and so lawless that he might refuse to listen even to his bishop. I should not be surprised to hear it of him."

"Certain things that you—that we object to, Lady Wrotham, I am sure he would not alter, and from what I know of the decisions made even by evangelical bishops, he would not be asked to alter."

"I am afraid you are right. I too know something of the time-serving ways of bishops. Very well, then, if that happens, Mr. Prentice must go. I have put up with enough. He has practically told me that I have no power to deprive him of his living, and, literally speaking, that may be true. But—well, I think he would go."

"But, Lady Wrotham, I should have to go with him."

"I am afraid that is so, and I should be sorry. But I suppose there would be no help for it. You would have the consolation of knowing that you were suffering for righteousness' sake."

Cold consolation this, perhaps, even if it were true, which it certainly would not be from Lady Wrotham's point of view, unless Mrs. Prentice was to suffer for Lady Wrotham's righteousness. Mrs. Prentice sat aghast. Then, after all that she had done and was still doing, after this last submission, which she was even now beginning to regret, this was all the mercy that was to be dealt out to her. Her hard obedience was to be wrested from her, but the punishment for rebellion was to fall on her shoulders in the same way as if she

had not obeyed at all. A spirit of rebellion was wrung from her now.

"I think that is rather hard," she said. "I as well as my husband are to be ruined, because he follows his conscience—for, after all, obstinate as he is, it is a matter of conscience with him."

"A pretty sort of conscience!" said Lady Wrotham. "But there is no question of ruin, Mrs. Prentice. A living could be found for him elsewhere where he would do less harm. And in any case, I should see to it that you, after the way you have followed the light, should not suffer—more than could be helped."

With this vague consolation Mrs. Prentice had to be content, and she thought that, perhaps, after all, it was a mistake for her to have come to Standon church with Lady Wrotham.

Lady Wrotham wrote to the Bishop of Archester that afternoon as she had threatened to do. She invited his lordship to dine and sleep at Exton Abbey at any time that would be convenient to him, and talk things over. She also hoped that he would bring his wife with him. But in case his engagements should prevent his accepting her invitation at an early date, she begged him to look into certain matters without delay. There followed a recital of these matters, and Lady Wrotham could have wished when she had written them that they looked more formidable, for she knew well that practices such as she complained of were not only allowed but even encouraged by some bishops, and she was doubtful whether the chief cause of her annoyance on account of them—that they were carried on in a parish in which her will should have been paramount—would strike his lordship with the same force as it struck her. If only Exton had been in the diocese of Danesborough, whose bishop would have put down anything and anybody in return for an invitation for himself and his wife from Lady Wrotham! But it was of no use to think

about that. She could only hope that the Bishop of Archester and his wife might find it convenient to visit her, and if not that he would write something that she could take advantage of. At any rate she had done her duty in writing to him, and if nothing came of it, well, there were still weapons left in her armoury.

When he heard of his wife's last act of rebellion, which he did in the vestry after the morning service, the Vicar was so angry that he ran a grave risk of losing all the merit he had acquired from the religious exercises of the morning; but, before he had the opportunity of giving vent to his displeasure, he bethought himself, and with a self-discipline that did credit alike to his head and his heart, determined to go on with his method of treatment, and ignore the offence. So that, when Mrs. Prentice arrived home, seriously perturbed as to what should befall her, she was met with cold indifference, and the retorts which she had prepared against reproach became weapons of attack on herself and caused her considerable discomfort. Fred inquired of her over the vicarage dinner-table whether she had enjoyed her outing, and her reply that she had not anticipated enjoyment from going to church on Sunday morning, caused him to express amusement, against which she defended herself by accusing him of meaning amusement when he had used the word enjoyment. The Vicar sat silent through the little dispute and then turned the conversation. "I thought you and I might have a walk together this afternoon," he said to his son. "We would start after school at four o'clock and we can get back to tea at about half-past five."

"Lady Wrotham has very kindly asked me to take Fred to tea with her this afternoon," said Mrs. Prentice. "I think, perhaps, he had better come."

The Vicar was silent. Fred was silent too, for a moment. He had plans for the afternoon which did not fit in with either of these suggested to him. "I said I would go to tea

with Mrs. O'Keefe this afternoon," he said boldly. It is true that he had said it, but only to himself.

Mrs. Prentice proved singularly complacent over the downfall of her arrangements. "Well, to-morrow will do for the Abbey," she said. "You are not going till Tuesday."

"Couldn't you call on Mrs. O'Keefe while I am at the school?" said the Vicar. "I shall be away for the whole day to-morrow, and I should like a walk and a talk with you, Fred."

Fred did not see his way to refuse this suggestion, and gave way, not with the best of grace. His determination had arisen from certain occurrences of the morning. He had gone down to the church at about a quarter to eleven and waited about in the churchyard until the bell finally ceased ringing. When he had at last gone in he had seen Norah O'Keefe in her seat just in front of the vicarage pew and Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda with her. He supposed that all three had been to the earlier service and remained to the latter, which was the case. He had then sat and stood and knelt for an hour with his eyes fixed upon the dark coils of Norah's hair, neat in their careful twining under a most becoming hat, on a little ear made for lyrical rhapsody, and on the soft bloom of a sloping cheek. He had longed for larger fields of wonder and delight to explore, but none had been opened out to him, for the fair worshipper had turned neither to the right nor to the left. He spent most of the time in which he should have been listening to his father's sermon in calculations as to which way the offertory bag might be expected to pass along the seat in front of him. If various things happened, which were not very likely to happen, she might turn round and hand it to him, perhaps with a smile of recognition; but when the time came these things did not happen, and he gave his shilling grudgingly and of necessity, without having gained more than a mere glance at her profile as she handed the bag to the churchwarden.

During the singing of the last hymn Hilda Redcliffe turned and looked at him, without friendliness, and instantly withdrew her gaze. His at that moment was fastened intently on the point of the ear aforementioned, with an expression that may have afforded her some enlightenment.

When church was over he suddenly relinquished his intention of waiting till she left her seat and walking down the aisle with her, and hurried out to stand by the porch. Then, without waiting, he pushed on to the gate, and then further on still to a point at which she and the Redcliffes would have parted if both should be going straight back to their homes. When he had reached this point he turned back again, because, if she should be going to walk through the park a little way with her friends he would miss her altogether, and to risk that would be worse than to greet her under the eyes of Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda.

He raised his hat to the three ladies in common, but his eyes were on Norah. She greeted him with some signs of embarrassment, as if she would rather have been without the necessity of greeting him at all. Mrs. Redcliffe said, "How do you do, Fred?" without a smile, and without offering to shake hands. Hilda turned away without saying anything, and the question now arose as to what he should do next.

It appeared that there was nothing to do but to go away, for Norah turned with her friends along a field-path towards the park, and it was not in his power to accompany them.

"It's that girl," he said to himself angrily, as he walked home. "She has given her some account of what happened yesterday that has set her against me."

The hours were slipping away. He would be gone very shortly; half his time had gone already, and he had made no headway—had gone back since that propitious and memorable train journey. He made up his mind that he would go again to see her that afternoon. He would need some

courage because he had presented himself three times at her house the day before and she had not apparently desired greatly to see him, and now probably desired it still less. Still, it was his only chance, and if he once got her alone he thought he would be able to throw off his diffidence and make his admiration understood. That was imperative, if he were to go any farther, and of course he must go farther. What lover could be content to stand still?

So, then, matters stood, and after luncheon he escaped from his mother, who would have liked to talk to him, and indeed, to advise him upon the very matter he had in hand, if she could have gained his confidence, and walked in the outermost parts of the vicarage glebe until three o'clock, when he went over to Street House.

Bridget, who was on duty that afternoon, received him with no special marks of favour, but showed him straight into Norah's drawing-room, where she was reading in a chair by the open window. Neither did her look express pleasure at his advent, but some surprise and perhaps a shade of annoyance.

"You'll think I'm always turning up," he said. "But I couldn't get a word with you yesterday."

Still some further explanation seemed necessary, and he supplied what he could, not altogether pleased to be obliged to advert to the affairs of the Redcliffes again.

"I went up to the White House yesterday morning, you know," he began. But she struck in —

"Oh, I have heard all about that, Mr. Prentice. We needn't talk about it any more."

"Well, I wanted to tell you that I had done everything I could."

"Please sit down," she said. "Mr. Prentice, I don't think you were very successful in what you did. If I had known that you were no longer a close friend of the Redcliffes I would not have asked you to go."

"But—but—I *was* their friend until they practically told me that they didn't want my friendship."

"Because it was quite plain that they had already lost it. I can quite believe that they didn't want the kind of lukewarm support you offered them instead of it."

"Oh, Mrs. O'Keefe, you can't have heard the true story of what happened. I said that what had happened would make absolutely no difference in—in me, and ——"

"You wouldn't have wanted to say that if it—if there had been no difference. Can't you see that it isn't what you say that your friends go by? it is what you are to them; and, whatever you say, they know well enough whether you are the same or—there is a difference. Hilda knew, of course, that there was—a difference. Why, even I can see it, although she has said very little to me and I didn't know you before."

"I dare say you can see it," he said. "I hope you can, for you are the cause of it."

"I!" She drew herself in with a look of frank distaste.

"Yes. It's no use trying to hide it, and I don't want to hide it. I shan't be here long, and I must tell you now. Of course Hilda Redcliffe and I are friends and I liked her and —and all that sort of thing. But that came to an end the moment I saw you. You must know that I ——"

"Oh, please stop," she said, her face flaming and her hands raised to her ears as if she would have shut out the sound of his torrent of words. "You mustn't say such things to me. It is absurd, and, really, Mr. Prentice, it is rather impertinent. We are hardly more than complete strangers, and you can't think that in any case I would listen to you."

"Why not?" he said. "What I say is as true as anything can be. I don't care how long we have known each other. I loved you the first moment I saw you, and I love

you now, better than anything in the world. It can't be impertinent to say that."

"It is. It is. And do you think that I would listen to you, even if—if—oh, it is too absurd, but—if I wanted to, when you have behaved so badly to Hilda? You don't think at all about *her*. Do you really think you can come straight from her to me, and—say such things?"

Why is it that a lover in the state of mind which had overtaken this lover can never see when his suit is quite hopeless, but must go on urging it? "I wouldn't have said anything," Fred went on, "so soon—I didn't mean to say a word when I came here—I hadn't an idea of it. But I can't help it. This wretched business has come up and spoilt everything. If it hadn't been for that I should have seen you while I am here, and—I'd have waited, although I don't want to wait to know my own mind. That was made up directly I saw you."

"Oh, please stop," she said, holding her hand in front of her as if to close his mouth actually; "please stop. I can't listen to you. I don't want to listen to you. It is all so wild, and—so absurd."

"You keep on saying it is absurd," he interrupted her again. "It isn't absurd for a man to fall in love with a woman—with such a woman as you, the very first time he sees her. And it is not absurd for him to tell her so."

"Very well, then," she said. "Now you have told me, and I won't say that it is absurd any more, but I will say that I hope you will go away and say no more about it."

She spoke with dawning anger, and as he looked at her he felt himself beaten. But he made another effort. "I dare say I have spoken too soon," he said, "but I couldn't help myself. You won't send me away because of that, will you? You'll let me see you while I'm here, and—and ——"

"No," she said decisively. "I would very much rather not."

"You are afraid I should worry you, I suppose."

She looked down at the book on her knee and turned over some of its pages. Then she looked up with a smile.

"Well, wouldn't you?" she asked. "Isn't that what you want to see me for?"

He took heart at the smile and gave her one in return, rather rueful. "I wouldn't worry you," he said. "At any rate until I knew you—till you knew me better. But you can't tell me to go away now, like this, with nothing to look forward to—nothing to hope for."

She grew serious again. "There *is* nothing to hope for in the way you mean," she said. "Nothing at all. No, I don't want you to come here and I must ask you not to, Mr. Prentice. You know how I stand with your mother. I don't want to go into it all again with you. But I won't be friends with her, I won't see her, while she is behaving as she does now, and it would be unpleasant to me, and, I think, to her, if you were to come here while she doesn't. I don't want you to. And besides, I haven't said much about the Redcliffes, but I feel now that they do not want you any more than they want Mrs. Prentice. And it is they who are my friends here. You haven't behaved well to Hilda—you know you haven't; you must feel it in your heart of hearts. And to think that I—oh, no, Mr. Prentice, I won't say a word about what you have told me, but it must end there. Indeed it must, once and for all."

"I can't take that answer," he said doggedly; "I am in earnest, and I couldn't leave off loving you now if I wanted to."

Her eyes flashed. "You can leave off telling me about it," she said, "and you must do so. I've heard enough, and perhaps I have been too patient with you."

He sat still gloomy and dejected. She looked at him with a frown. "I have nothing more to say," she said sharply. "I hope you will go away now, and not come again."

Her tone stung him. He raised his eyes to hers. "I think you might put some value on my feelings towards you," he said, "even if you can't return them."

Her Irish temper flamed forth. She sprang from her seat. "Return them!" she cried. "What nonsense you are talking! I wish you would go away. You annoy me deeply. I don't want you. I know nothing of you, and what I do know I don't like. I think Hilda Redcliffe is quite right not to have anything more to do with you. I don't know why she ever had anything to do with you at all. And you come straight to me, almost a complete stranger, and tell me that it is owing to me you have behaved to her as you have. It *is* absurd, and it *is* impertinent." She moved towards the bell. "If you won't go," she said, "I shall ring and ask my maid to show you out. I never want to see you again."

"I'll go," he said. "But I think you will be sorry for the way you have spoken to me when you come to think of it."

"That is just the sort of thing Mrs. Prentice would say," she said. "I have nothing to be sorry for. I shall try and forget this very unpleasant visit as soon as I can. No, I won't shake hands. We are not friends, and I don't want to be."

He left her without another word, rejected finally, and not without ignominy. "What a fool I was!" he said to himself bitterly as he walked back to the vicarage; and during the walk with his father, when he tried his best to talk and hide his unhappiness, these words repeated themselves again and again in his mind as a refrain to everything that was said. "What a fool I was!" And the train dinned them into his ears as he travelled up to London the next morning, for he had cut short his visit, and resolved that he would not repeat it for many months. "What a fool I was!"

But perhaps it was as well for him that he had put his fortune to the test and lost it. For when the door had closed

behind him, and Norah O'Keefe was left alone, she burst into angry tears. Then she went and stood before the picture of her gallant young husband and cried, "As if I would! As if I could! And a man like that! I hate him for asking me, but I should have hated him just as much if he hadn't spoken now and given me the chance of getting rid of him once for all. I am glad, after all, that he did."

Then she dried her eyes and went back to her book, but found that its interest had departed. She kept looking out of the window into the garden and her face was at first stormy and then sad. By and bye she smiled, and finally laughed. Then she sprang up from her chair. "I should like to tell Hilda," she said. "It would clear away any feeling she may have kept for that young man. But, of course, I can't. But I'll go and have tea with the dear people. If I stay by myself I shall get melancholy."

CHAPTER XXIV

BROWNE IS PRECIPITATE

Sophia Riddell, who took brevet rank as Mrs. Riddell in Lady Wrotham's household, was a very important member of that society. Her religious views were such as to insure the full confidence of her mistress, or she would not have been where she was, and her discretion was perfect. It is doubtful whether the great lady quite realized what this elderly spinster, who understood her ways so completely that she forestalled all her wishes and seldom had to be told to do a thing once, and never twice, meant to her, and what a blank there would be in her life if the invaluable Riddell for any reason should go out of it. Lady Wrotham liked gossip, although it would have shocked her to hear it as much as if she had been told that she liked drink; and Riddell was an inveterate gossip. But what a gossip! She was as far above the habits of the ordinary tongue-wagging, prying and peering village matron as the imperial financier who thinks in continents, and only incidentally in gold and diamond mines, is above the shady company promoter who collects the odds and ends of savings, no matter from where. The odds and ends came to her, but they came because it was considered an honour to bring them. She would not have moved a foot or turned an ear to collect them, nor would she have expressed a hint of interest in them for the world. But they came nevertheless, and to all appearances were lost in the secret caverns of her discretion and lost for ever, nevermore to flow forth in refreshing rills and trickles to water the thirsty soil of curiosity, and spread their beneficent influence in widening circles.

Nor did they so flow forth; but there was an outlet all the same. Every drop of gossip that filtered through the surface of that impassive, but none the less receptive, demeanour went to swell one rich, deep stream, which was poured out night and morning for the refreshment of her mistress, and none other. It welled forth copiously but quietly, as is the way with deep waters, with never a ripple or a splash of eagerness to betray its quality, and it was absorbed again in other discretionary caverns, where it either slept undisturbed, or rose up in fruitful springs to water the higher levels.

All of which means nothing more than that Mrs. Riddell performed for the great lady the part of reader, and gave her night and morning selections from the book of servants' and village gossip, the pages of which she would not and could not have turned over for herself.

And so it came to pass that Lady Wrotham knew that Turner had gone down to propose to Mrs. O'Keefe the day after he had done so, and that he had not succeeded in his object, and that he had since relinquished it; and that Browne would probably some day do the same; and that Fred Prentice had also fallen a victim to the same overpowering attraction, having left a former pursuit with surprising suddenness; and that he had probably been dismissed, but this was not yet quite certain; also of Mrs. Prentice's ignominious repulse at the door of Street House, and of that warm evening flitting to the nest of injured friends, and the freshly-riveted chain of affection that bound them.

To these things Lady Wrotham listened, making what comments were suitable for the ears of her informant, and others, quite different from them, in her own mind. One of these latter was that she hoped it would not be long before she should have an opportunity of inspecting this Mrs. O'Keefe, and another that it should not be long before she came to an understanding with Mr. Browne on these and

sundry matters. It was not, and she acknowledged to herself that it was not, strictly speaking, her business to interfere in matters of this sort amongst those upon whom she looked as her subjects. But the fact was that she felt she should like to take a hand in them, a friendly, helpful hand, it might very well be, if she saw reason to approve of developments progressing so far without her assistance. She wanted to be a friend to her subjects, as well as a ruler, but so far she had not been very fortunate in drawing them into the net of her patronage. Of all the better class inhabitants of her new kingdom, only Mrs. Prentice had shown the least desire to respond to her influence, and, to tell the truth, she was getting rather tired of Mrs. Prentice, as one gets tired of any dish if it is the only one set before one. She had only been at Exton a month, and she had already quarrelled with the Vicar, quarrelled by proxy with Mrs. Redcliffe and her daughter, quarrelled with Captain Turner, and gone very near to quarrelling with Mr. Browne. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that all these several people had in the most unaccountable way gone to work to pick quarrels with her, who wished them nothing but well, if only they would behave themselves and take their proper places in the scheme of things. It was absurd, though, to suppose that she should allow Mr. Browne to pick a quarrel with her. His position did not permit him to indulge in such luxuries, and if he was under the impression that it did, his mind must be disabused of that tendency.

Behold, then, our Maximilian Browne, summoned from his office at eleven o'clock on Monday morning when he was just in the thick of mapping out his week's work and that of his subordinates, perspiring pinkly on a low chair opposite to that of the great lady and devoutly wishing himself back whence he had come.

She had opened up on him with the subject of the new tenants for the Lodge, and had expressed her surprise that they,

or at all events a sample of them, had not been submitted to her, prior to acceptance.

"I certainly think," she said, "that considering the Lodge is the most important house in the place next to this, or the most important in the immediate surroundings, I ought to have been consulted on the matter before anything was finally decided."

"The references ——" began Browne, but she took him up.

"Oh, the references!" she exclaimed impatiently. "I have no doubt that Mr. Dale has got plenty of money, or, at any rate, enough money. That is not the point, Mr. Browne. With people living practically on one's door-step, one wants more than that. What do you know of these people—socially I mean? He was a friend of Sir Joseph Chapman and comes from Manchester. I have nothing against Sir Joseph Chapman, except that—no, I have nothing against him. But this man, he may be a Radical or a Dissenter, for all you know."

Browne had a horrible suspicion, undivulged as yet to anybody, that he was both. He had been over to Woodhurst to lunch with Mr. Dale, and from certain things that Mr. Dale had let drop in the course of conversation, this dark suspicion had arisen. He had comforted himself by saying that these things were not much in his line, and that he might have been mistaken; but he might rather have said that if the suspicion had occurred to him in spite of his lack of knowledge, it was probably justified.

"Is it too late to stop it?" asked Lady Wrotham; "at any rate until I have had an opportunity of judging what sort of people they are?"

"I'm afraid it is," replied Browne. "The lease is signed and everything, and the work is nearly finished. They are coming in next week."

"Well, I cannot help feeling that you have not behaved well about this, Mr. Browne. Of course you will tell me that everything has been submitted to Lord Wrotham and he

has approved. But you ought to feel, knowing the circumstances as you do, that something is owing to me in such matters as these. *He* will not consider it, and I should not go out of my way to beg him to do so. Certainly not. But because my son is careless of my wishes that is no reason why others should be. I ought to have been consulted."

"Well, I felt that," said Browne desperately. He could not very well tell the indignant dame that he had warned his employer that there might arise this very difficulty that had now arisen, and his employer had said, "If you are going to refuse every good tenant that comes along unless my mother approves of him, we'd better shut up shop and go into bankruptcy at once. Make out the lease, my stout friend, and don't be a fool."

"I felt that, Lady Wrotham," he said. "But Mr. Dale is such a good tenant, and is doing much more than we'd any right to ask, that we couldn't very well refuse him, and Lord Wrotham told me to put the matter through."

"Very well, then," she said. "There is nothing more to be said, and we must make the best of things. But, you will oblige me, Mr. Browne, by consulting me in the future on these matters before anything is finally settled."

Browne promised to do so, all the more readily as all the houses on the Manor were now let on substantial leases, and the first part of his ordeal was over.

"There is another matter I wished to speak to you about, Mr. Browne," said Lady Wrotham. "I hear that—that Mrs. O'Keefe, whose acquaintance I have not yet had the pleasure of making, has—I don't quite know how to put it—has such great personal attractions, that the whole village is talking about the way in which she is being run after."

Browne sat and stared at her with his mouth open. It was the only way in which he could express the devastating sense of surprise produced by her words.

"You will say," she proceeded, "that this has nothing to do with me, and that you are surprised that I should have the courage to mention it."

This was about what Browne would have said if he could have found his tongue and dared to use it freely. Except that he would have substituted the word "cheek" for "courage." As it was he said nothing.

"I do so in no spirit of interference," she went on, "but I should just like to say this, and I shall not object if my words are repeated to Captain Turner and young Mr. Prentice. I think it is a pity that the name of a young widow of Mrs. O'Keefe's position should be bandied about in this fashion. I venture to say it, because I am the only woman who is in a position to say it, and these things must be said by a woman or not at all—unless, of course, the lady in question had a relation in the place or near it who could look after her reputation."

"Her reputation!" echoed Browne, with a sunset flush of indignation and self-consciousness mantling his features.

"Yes, her reputation. Here is a young widow, a very young widow, beautiful, so I am told and can well believe, and of high birth. She settles down after her sad loss in a quiet country place, away from her relations and connections, and she ought to be treated with the utmost respect. She ought *not* to be talked about all over the place as a lady to whom every bachelor in the neighbourhood is paying his attentions. There is Captain Turner pursuing her, whose birth and upbringing, by his own confession, is in no way equal to hers; there is young Mr. Prentice, who cannot be much more than a boy, and has his way to make entirely, and from what I can hear is likely to make a great mess in doing it; and, Mr. Browne, there is yourself—you will excuse me for speaking quite plainly ——"

"Oh, certainly, Lady Wrotham," said Browne, who had by

this time collected his scattered brains and was nerving himself to exercise them to the best of his ability; "and what about me?"

"Well! Do you think your position here justifies you in —in ——"

"Do you mean in getting married if I want to?"

"Certainly not. You know I do not mean that. I should be pleased to see you happily married, very pleased indeed, and hope that some day you will be, to a suitable partner in life."

"And you don't think Mrs. O'Keefe would be suitable, supposing I wanted to marry her."

"Do you think she would yourself? Is your position here good enough to allow you to offer it to a lady of Mrs. O'Keefe's standing?"

"If it isn't good enough to allow me to marry anybody I want to marry, Lady Wrotham, if I do want to marry, which I don't, I'll throw it up at once. Captain Turner did tell me the other day that a man couldn't hold the position I do without losing his independence. I told him it was nonsense, but he says that sort of thing without meaning it; it's his way. If you think the same, if you think that a land agent can't be a gentleman ——"

"Oh, Mr. Browne, you are talking absurdly. Who could say such a thing?"

"Well, then, is it that *I* can't be a gentleman? I've always hoped I was. I don't boast about my family, but it's a good deal better than most people's, although my father was a country clergyman and a good way off the head of it. And as for money, I've got enough to marry on if I want to."

"Are you one of the ——?"

"Yes, I am, Lady Wrotham. You'll find me in the books if you like to look for me."

"Well, of course that does make a difference."

"I don't see that it makes any difference. I'm either a gentleman or I'm not a gentleman. If I am I oughtn't to be treated like a sort of upper servant and told to keep my place and who I'm to make friends with and who I'm not to make friends with. If that's the kind of land agent wanted on this property, Lady Wrotham, I'll send in my resignation to-morrow."

The honest gentleman was so outraged by what he considered an impertinent piece of interference that his eloquence would have carried him still farther if Lady Wrotham had not raised her hand and stopped him.

"You quite misunderstand me," she said, although he had not in the least misunderstood her, and if the unsuspected fact of his descent from a noble family had not been made plain to her she would have treated his other claims with scant ceremony. "And if you really have in your mind a direct proposal of marriage ——"

"I don't say whether I have or whether I haven't, Lady Wrotham," said Browne, "but if I'm to submit any private intentions of that sort to you before taking any steps, as I'm to submit the tenants on the Manor, as I say, I'll send in my resignation at once and go somewhere where such things as that aren't expected of an agent by his employers."

"I hope you won't say any more about that, Mr. Browne. Lord Wrotham would be very sorry to lose you, and I needn't say that I should be very sorry to lose you too. You need not fear that as long as you remain here you will be treated in every way as you ought to be treated."

"I'm sorry to say that I don't think I have been, Lady Wrotham," said Browne, rising. "If there is nothing more in the way of business that you want to speak to me about, if you'll excuse me, I'll get back to my work. Monday's a busy morning."

Lady Wrotham did not detain him. "I really think," she said to herself when he had left, "that I have come amongst the most cantankerous and opinionated set of people it would be possible to find anywhere. One cannot say the least little thing to any one of them without their flying in one's face. At the same time, Mr. Browne, in spite of his birth, which is news to me and I should not have expected, is not a suitable match for a young woman in Mrs. O'Keefe's position, and I hope she will not be so foolish as to accept him. By the bye, I wonder ——"

She took down from a shelf the ponderous red and gold bound volume in which are set forth the pedigrees of those who can lay claim to blue blood, even to the last pale infusion, so be it that it is inherited in the male line, and looked up the records of a certain Marquisate. Yes, there it was, Maximilian Philip, son of the Reverend Philip Maximilian, son of Colonel Orlando Maximilian, C. B., son of the Very Reverend the Dean of Ballymalone, son of the Honourable Maximilian Philip Orlando, brother of the First Marquess, and in remainder to the Earldom and sundry ancient Baronies; a long way off the fountain head, it was true, and unlikely ever to wade through the ocean of Maximilians and Philips and Orlandos that lay between, but filling its little niche of distinction all the same. Lady Wrotham shut the book and put it back on its shelf. "If I had known," she said, "that M. P. stood for Maximilian Philip, I should not have been likely to make that little mistake," which for Lady Wrotham was a serious admission of error. She took down the book again and looked up the Earldom of Ballyshannon.

"Sons of the Fifth Earl. Michael John, present peer, Patrick Ernest, Captain Grenadier Guards, married Norah, daughter of John O'Malley, M. D."

"H'm!"

Honest Browne, as much put out by what had occurred as

his equable nature permitted, left the Abbey and marched straight up the village past his office, where both people and papers were awaiting his attention and knocked at the door of Street House. Mrs. O'Keefe was writing in the little room off the hall, and he was shown in to her.

"Mrs. O'Keefe," he said, shaking hands with her earnestly, "I have come to ask you a question. I've just been infernally insulted by Lady Wrotham, and—will you marry me?"

He ought to have added the word "There!" to make his question completely expressive of his feelings, but perhaps they were plainly evident without it.

A mischievous light shone in Norah's eyes. "Let us sit down first," she said, and did so as far from the chair to which she had motioned Browne as the dimensions of the room would permit.

"I'm in dead earnest," said Browne. "I'm not as young as I was, but very few of us are. Anyhow, I'm not much over forty, and I don't suppose I shall be much different from what I am now for another twenty years. A lot of fellows couldn't say the same, but I live a healthy life. I'm very easy to get on with, and you wouldn't have any trouble with me at all. I'm not rich, but I've got a decent income and a good house, and if I have to give up the one I've got now I should not have any difficulty in finding just as good a job somewhere else, and perhaps a better one. Now what do you think of it?"

"I think it is very kind of you to offer me the chance, Mr. Browne," replied Norah. "But aren't you very comfortable as you are now?"

"Yes, I am. But I don't think I should be any less comfortable if I got married, perhaps more so. I should like it. Upon my word I should, and I hope you'll say yes."

"I'm afraid I can't quite do that, Mr. Browne. But of

course we are real friends, and I hope always shall be, and if there is any other way in which you can score off Lady Wrotham, I'll do my best to help you. I suppose she told you that she couldn't hear of your—asking me, and you *have* asked me so as to show her that you are not going to take your orders from her."

"Well, it wasn't exactly like that. And, of course, I shouldn't have thought of asking you unless I really wanted to. But I've wanted to a good long time, only I haven't quite seen my way. Don't you think you could manage it, Mrs. O'Keefe?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Browne. But tell me more about Lady Wrotham. How was it that my name came up?"

"Well, she had the cheek to tackle me about the way in which I—and others she mentioned, but I needn't go into that—were what she called running after you."

Norah's manner underwent a change. "I think that was quite uncalled for," she said. "She seems to be a very interfering old lady."

"She is. There's not a doubt about it. I stuck up for her as long as I could, but—she *is* interfering. You're quite right. I'm sure if I've done anything in the way of—of what she says, that I ought not to have done, I'm very sorry for it."

"My dear Mr. Browne, if you had it would be no affair of Lady Wrotham's. It would be my affair and mine only. But you have done nothing but to give me a friendship which I value highly, and hope to go on valuing. For I should be very sorry if it was withdrawn from me now."

"I am very glad to hear you say that, Mrs. O'Keefe. I can assure you that *I* shall never be any different, even if we don't get any farther. But don't you think you could bring yourself to it, Mrs. O'Keefe?"

"No, I think not. I am very grateful for the honour you have done me in asking me."

"Oh, don't mention that, please. It's the other way about—at least it would be. But, of course, if you can't—I must put up with it. Still, *you* don't say that I'm so far beneath you that I ought to be ashamed of myself for thinking of it."

"Good gracious, no. Surely, Lady Wrotham didn't tell you that?"

"As good as. I tell you what it is, Mrs. O'Keefe, if I can't do my work here without putting myself in the position of being hauled over the coals by her about things that have nothing to do with the work I'm paid to do in the place, I shall go and do the same work somewhere else where I'm not interfered with."

"I think you would be quite justified in doing so. But I hope you won't. Everybody would miss you here, tremendously. You know that I should. I hope you told Lady Wrotham what you thought of her interference?"

"Yes, I did. And I came straight off here to—well, to try my luck."

"I am not sorry that you did so, Mr. Browne, although I *am* sorry that I can't give you the answer you want. If you *do* want it, you know," she added with a smile at him.

"There's no doubt about that," said Browne. "But if you say no, it must be no. Still, you won't let this make any difference, will you?"

"No, I won't; not the smallest difference."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. O'Keefe. You've taken a great load off my mind. I'm afraid I must be getting back now. I've a lot of things to see to at the office. Good-bye! We must have a little dinner and a little Bridge again soon. It's jolly to have you back here. I say! I suppose you won't say anything about—you know—what I asked you?"

"Of course I won't. Don't you know me better than that?"

"Well, I don't really mind if you do. I'm not ashamed of it. Good-bye, for the present, Mrs. O'Keefe. You've taken a great weight off my mind."

Norah watched him go busily past her window on his way to his work. "Nice old thing!" she said, laughing to herself. "I'm glad to have taken a weight off his mind. I wonder what sort of a weight I should have put on to it if I had said yes. But really! Yes, I shall certainly go and call on Lady Wrotham."

CHAPTER XXV

NORAH'S ATTEMPT

NORAH O'KEEFE, looking as if some of the freshness and beauty of the fair May month had transferred itself bodily to her, and was sparkling in her face and figure, walked down through the village and presented herself at the Abbey. Lady Wrotham had come in from her afternoon drive and was sitting by her tea-table, a little figure of old-fashioned dignity and homeliness combined, surrounded by the pictures and books and fine furniture of the big room in which she lived most of her life, as if it was the most natural of environments for her, eating her tea-cake with as much enjoyment as could have been shown by her housekeeper and the invaluable Riddell in the more homely regions devoted to their pursuits. There was something in her, sitting alone in her black dress and thus occupied, that touched Norah with compassion as she entered the room, and the great little lady, rising not without difficulty from her chair to greet her, was also affected by the appearance of her visitor, so graceful and pretty, who brought in with her a breath from the storehouse of eternal youth, which revivifies the earth and renews contentment to those who have lost it.

"How do you do?" she said. "I am very pleased to see you," and added, "my dear," as if she could not help herself.

She talked of Norah's Irish visit, and of her husband's relations, some of whom she knew, and asked her by and by why she had settled herself at Exton.

"I felt as if I must get as far away from everybody as possible," said Norah, "at that dreadful time—three years ago

And he and I had been here, on our honeymoon, and thought the place so beautiful and quiet and peaceful."

A shadow came over her face, and it was repeated in Lady Wrotham's. "I am afraid it is not so peaceful as it looks," she said. "The waywardness of mankind can spoil the most beautiful of places."

"There are things that make it not quite perfect," said Norah. "But I have been happy here—happier than I thought I could ever be again. I have found the best of friends."

Lady Wrotham looked thoughtful. "Your chief friend, I suppose, is Mrs. Redcliffe?" she said.

"Mrs. Redcliffe and her daughter," Norah replied boldly. "They would make any place—a far less beautiful place than this—attractive to me."

"I hear good accounts of Mrs. Redcliffe from every quarter," said Lady Wrotham slowly; "except, perhaps, one."

"I know the quarter from which the other opinion comes," said Norah, "and I hope you won't mind my saying, that I think it is a great pity that you should let a woman like Mrs. Prentice influence you against a woman like Mrs. Redcliffe—especially as you have never seen Mrs. Redcliffe."

She felt a little frightened at her boldness, and would probably have felt more frightened still if she had known Lady Wrotham better. But Lady Wrotham did not stare at her in surprised offence as she might have been expected to do, but said quietly—

"My dear, how can I get to know Mrs. Redcliffe, if she won't come and see me?"

Norah was a little taken aback. She had hardly expected this mildness, and had thought of Lady Wrotham as being opposed to Mrs. Redcliffe in the same way as Mrs. Prentice was opposed to her, if not quite so noisily. "I hardly think

she would care to do that," she said hesitatingly, "after what has happened."

"Well, what has happened?" asked Lady Wrotham, still speaking with mild reasonableness. "At least, what has happened to set her against me personally? I mentioned, I think now unfortunately, what I quite thought everybody who knew her was aware of. I may have had some slight prejudice against her on account of her marriage, for I certainly don't approve of marriage with a deceased wife's sister on general principle. But, on the other hand, I should not necessarily refuse to know a lady who had contracted such a marriage without hearing all the circumstances of the case, or seeing for myself what kind of woman she was, and that is what I have never had an opportunity of doing in this case. What am I to do?"

"I think there is one thing you might do, Lady Wrotham," said Norah, again taking her courage in both hands, "and that is to stop Mrs. Prentice in the mischief she is making. She is behaving outrageously. Mrs. Redcliffe has always treated her with every possible kindness. None of us love Mrs. Prentice much, here. She is not a lovable woman, and it has often been difficult to—to be nice to her; she is so interfering, and so—well, so spiteful. But Mrs. Redcliffe has never let us say a word against her, or against anybody for that matter, and has always been sweet and good to her. She is a wonderful woman—Mrs. Redcliffe; you can't help loving and admiring her. She is so gentle, and strong, and good. And I say that it is a horrible thing that Mrs. Prentice's tongue should be loosed against her; yes, Lady Wrotham, and I think that it is a great pity that you should make a friend and a confidante of Mrs. Prentice, and give her your support in the mischief she is doing."

She had worked herself into a state between tears and indignation. All the wrongs of her friends rose up before her

as she spoke, and beside them was the picture of malice and mischief stalking triumphant and unabashed through their lives. She would not have minded now if Lady Wrotham had risen in anger against the outspokenness of her attack, and she would have been quite prepared to carry it still further. But Lady Wrotham was still quiet and reasonable.

"It is not in the least my wish to support Mrs. Prentice in the way you mention," she said. "I am annoyed with her for putting the scandal about, and if what I constantly hear, from others as well as you, is true, fomenting it, after I expressly told her that I did not wish what I had told her to go any farther."

"Did you tell her that?" asked Norah, in surprise.

"Yes, I distinctly told her so, after I learnt that it was not generally known, and I consider that she has disobeyed me, although she says that Mrs. Redcliffe and—and Miss Redcliffe—spoke to her first, before she had repeated it to a soul."

"She had been so abominably rude to them," said Norah hotly, "that they could hardly help asking her for an explanation of her behaviour. And, of course, that is what she meant them to do. She wouldn't be able to keep a thing like that to herself. It is not in her. She hates Mrs. Redcliffe, because she is good, and she is only too pleased to have this excuse for turning on her."

"That is a very harsh thing to say," said Lady Wrotham. "I do not think Mrs. Prentice is a bad woman, although I am afraid she is rather a tiresome one. She has been of considerable use to me in—in rather difficult matters in connection with religion since I have been here, and I think she has undergone a genuine change of heart."

"Oh, Lady Wrotham, how can you think that?" exclaimed Norah. "Can't you see that she is ready to do everything she can to please you, simply because of the position you hold here—and in the world? If you were not what—who

you are, she would have opposed you bitterly in all these things, as she opposed dear old Sir Joseph Chapman, before I came here."

"I don't like to hear you say that," said Lady Wrotham. "And I never heard that there was any unpleasantness with Sir Joseph Chapman."

"Oh, there was, Lady Wrotham, though it was some years ago. Miss Chapman, before she died, wanted to get the people to come to some religious meetings here, and Sir Joseph was quite willing and would have helped her, but Mrs. Prentice made herself so unpleasant about it—she said it would do a great deal of harm in the place—that she managed to stop it. Sir Joseph gave in to her for the sake of peace. He couldn't bear anything like strife in the place."

"Did not Mr. Prentice do what he could to stop these meetings?"

"I don't know. I don't suppose he would have cared for them, but I have never heard him mentioned in connection with them. It was Mrs. Prentice who bestirred herself."

"Well, of course it was wrong of her—if they were to be simple Evangelical gatherings. But she has acted in a very different way with *my* efforts in that direction."

"Because you are Lady Wrotham, and she would tremble at the idea of opposing you in anything, and Sir Joseph was so mild and unpretentious that ——"

"You mean, I suppose, that she is what is usually called a snob?"

"Yes, I do mean that. Why, when I first came here, although I am nobody particular apart from my husband's family—but there is just the little handle to my name—she showed it quite plainly. She did her best to keep me from making friends with the Redcliffes, and I had quite a wrong impression of them—taken from her—until I did get to know them."

"That is reprehensible. I know that people do run after titles. I dislike that sort of thing very much. I had not observed it in Mrs. Prentice, but you say you have. She did it to you, and in such a way that you could not help noticing it. Your powers of observation are stronger than mine."

"No; but, you see, Lady Wrotham, perhaps I don't bear my little honour so naturally as any one would who was born with it."

"I think you bear it very well, my dear."

"And I can't help noticing the difference in the way some people—people like Mrs. Prentice—treat me now from the way they treated me before. At any rate, I have not the slightest doubt that she is an arrant snob, and that that is the reason why you find her so meek and obedient, when none of us who have known her well find her anything like that."

"I dare say you are right, though perhaps I have flattered myself that I convinced her of her errors through other means. However, I do think that you are right in one thing. I cannot disguise from myself that every one but Mrs. Prentice speaks well of Mrs. Redcliffe, and seems even prepared to quarrel ferociously with me, who am innocent of offence in the matter, on her behalf. I have been annoyed with her all along about the trouble she has caused over that, and now that it has been made clearer still to me, I shall lose no time in telling her so."

The opportunity of doing so occurred sooner than Lady Wrotham had anticipated, for the door opened at that moment and Mrs. Prentice was announced.

She came forward with the air of a welcome *habitué*, but, on seeing Norah, hesitated in her advance, and acquired a pinched expression about the mouth. She shook hands with Lady Wrotham, who did not rise from her seat to do so, nor infuse any warmth into the action. Then she turned to Norah, and said with a smile that was both sweet and sour,

"How do you do, Mrs. O'Keefe? I came to welcome you home on Saturday, but, no doubt through some misunderstanding of your servant's, I was not able to do so."

"There was no misunderstanding, Mrs. Prentice," said Norah in a clear voice, and withholding her hand; "I told all my servants to say I was not at home to you."

The sweetness of Mrs. Prentice's smile departed, and an additional infusion of acidity took its place. "Oh, indeed," she said; "I am sorry you should have done that, because it was a rude thing to do, and you need not fear that I should go where I am not wanted. But there is no need to trouble Lady Wrotham with our little disputes. We can settle them amongst ourselves." She turned towards Lady Wrotham with an air of being about to turn the conversation, and of leaving Norah out of it as a troublesome child who has misbehaved and had better be left to itself to come to its senses. But Norah spoke again.

"There is no dispute between us, Mrs. Prentice, and I have just been talking over these things with Lady Wrotham. Mrs. Redcliffe is a dear friend of mine, and I simply refuse to have in my house, or to have anything to do with, any one who has behaved to her as you have."

"Oh, but this is outrageous," said Mrs. Prentice. "Lady Wrotham knows very well how this unfortunate affair about Mrs. Redcliffe has arisen, and that I had nothing whatever to do with it."

"I do not know that, Mrs. Prentice," struck in Lady Wrotham. "I do not know that. There has been a great deal of unnecessary talk and scandal about Mrs. Redcliffe, and I have been very annoyed about it. If it had not been for you I am quite sure it would not have happened."

Mrs. Prentice grew turkey-red. There was much displeasure in the great lady's tone, and, however much she might have been prepared to make little of it and seek to

remove it by such wiles as she could use if she had been alone with her, it annoyed her excessively to be spoken to in this way before a third party.

"I really think, Lady Wrotham," she said, "that you are doing me a great injustice. I told you distinctly, if you remember, that I did *not* put about the news of Mrs. Redcliffe's marriage."

"That is just a quibble," began Norah, but Lady Wrotham again struck in.

"Let me speak clearly," she said, "once and for all. Mrs. Prentice, I will say no more of how the news that I told only to you got about. But I know from my own observation since it did get about that you have done your best to make the worst of it. I have been seriously displeased at it, and have meant to say so, but did not, because I hoped that you would come to see in what an un-Christian manner you were behaving. I do so now. It ill becomes one who professes the change of heart that you have recently undergone to act in that way; and if it goes on I shall begin to think that there has been no change at all, and that you are still in a state of darkness."

This was too much. To be talked to like a naughty schoolgirl before Mrs. O'Keefe, whom she had designed to present to her patroness, as one who was in a position to be able to do that little service for her by reason of the close intimacy that existed between her and Lady Wrotham—this was bad enough. But to be held up before her as an example of a repentant Low Church sinner, whose repentance was looked upon with grave suspicion, was more than she could bear. The cords of her allegiance snapped under the strain, and she threw complacency to the winds. "Pooh!" she exclaimed. "I have never professed any change of heart at all, not of that sort. I don't believe in it, and I certainly don't require it. You have made a mistake, Lady Wrotham. I think your ideas on re-

ligious matters are entirely wrong, and I have only given in to them as much as I have to try and keep the peace, which you have done your best to disturb since you have been here. I shall do so no longer. What do I get by it? Simply insults and injustice."

Lady Wrotham stared at her with ever deepening displeasure. "Do you know what you are saying?" she asked when Mrs. Prentice had come to the end of her diatribe.

Mrs. Prentice was in for it now. She had burnt her boats in a fit of pique, and although, confronted with Lady Wrotham's stern face and forbidding air, she had a moment's inclination to knuckle under and retreat, the presence of Norah O'Keefe swept away that momentary impulse. She rose from the chair in which she had seated herself. "Yes, I know very well," she said. "I have been too patient, too conciliatory. You will have nothing more to do with me. Very well, I can't help it. I have done all I can to meet your views, but my conscience now bids me stop and take a firm line. I walk out of this house, and I don't wish ever to enter it again as long as you are here, Lady Wrotham."

"I think you had better do so," said Lady Wrotham, "before you forget yourself further."

So Mrs. Prentice walked out, in a towering rage which turned to trembling as soon as she had crossed the threshold. But this time no port, no biscuits could revive her. She went home and threw herself on her bed to think over what she had done, the unhappiest woman in Exton.

Lady Wrotham, left alone with Norah O'Keefe, turned her head away from the door through which Mrs. Prentice had disappeared, and said, "Well, I have had a lesson. I have no doubt now that you are right, and that Mrs. Prentice has merely pretended to agree with me on matters that I have at heart, with a view to insinuating herself into my favour. I am glad I have found her out. I am shocked at her vulgarity

and hypocrisy. We need not trouble ourselves with her any longer, and, Mrs. O'Keefe, now that I find I have been mistaken in her, I must do my best to put right what has been wrong with regard to Mrs. Redcliffe, through my agency, I fear, in the first place, although not with my intention. And you must help me. You must either bring Mrs. Redcliffe here to see me, or I will go and see her, I do not mind which it is. But if I go to see her she must be prepared for my visit. I should not care to go and to be refused admittance."

"I do not think that would happen, Lady Wrotham."

"It would not, of course, if she was prepared for my visit. And perhaps you had better prepare her. It would perhaps be more of a compliment if I waived ceremony and went to see her. I should not like to appear to be in the position of sending for her. You can see her between now and to-morrow afternoon, I suppose, and can let me know how my visit would be received. You must let her know that I should come as a friend, and should like to have her as a friend, if she will overlook the little mistake which has caused such trouble. You can explain to her that the trouble has been none of my doing."

This was very handsome, and Norah felt it was meant to be so. "I will do what I can," she said, "and I am sure they will be glad."

A shade came over Lady Wrotham's face. "I had forgotten the girl for the moment," she said. "Of course, she did send a very impertinent message to me."

"She may have said something to Mrs. Prentice in her anger," said Norah. "I don't know what it was, but I am quite sure that whatever she did say Mrs. Prentice made the most of."

"I dare say you are right. Well, I will overlook that, and think no more about it. You had better come and tell me what has passed at twelve o'clock to-morrow, and I will go

and see Mrs. Redcliffe about four o'clock in the afternoon. And now, my dear, let me tell you how glad I am to have you here. I am rather cut off from my old friends, and have not, so far, cared to invite people to stay with me here. I shall do so by and by, when I have a little recovered from my loss, which still affects me, although I try to show it as little as possible, and I shall hope to have some young people in the house, from time to time. But you must come and cheer me up. I shall always be glad to see you."

Norah made suitable acknowledgments and took her leave. "She really isn't half a bad old thing," she said to herself as she walked away, "and she seems to have taken a fancy to me. Nothing was said about my 'goings on,' and nothing probably will be said now. Well, if she succeeds in putting things right with Mrs. Redcliffe—and I must do my best to bring that about—I will be friends with her. But not unless."

Norah went to see Mrs. Redcliffe the next morning and explained the situation to her. "I have no objection to seeing Lady Wrotham," Mrs. Redcliffe said. "I do not know that she can be blamed for her part in the trouble, and if she is no longer under the influence of Mrs. Prentice —— But I don't know what Hilda will say, Norah. She is far more upset about it than I am, you know. Dear girl, it is all out of pure loyalty to me."

"Where is Hilda?" asked Norah. "Can't we talk to her?"

"I think you had better do so. She is painting in the church. Tell her that Lady Wrotham is coming to see us this afternoon, and that I hope she will lay aside her dislike and help me to come to an understanding with her."

So Norah went down to the church, and found Hilda Redcliffe in one of the pews, in the early stages of a painting of the pulpit, which was an object of which the inhabitants of Exton were justly proud.

She found her unexpectedly obdurate. She grew indignant and distressed the moment the object of Norah's address to her was mentioned. "How can mother think of it?" she exclaimed. "And how can you advise her to do it, Norah? I dare say it is true that Lady Wrotham is not so bad as Mrs. Prentice, but she has listened to Mrs. Prentice, she has not lifted a finger to stop all the scandal she has put about, and she has made a bosom friend of Mrs. Prentice, all the time she has been doing everything she could to do harm to mother. I think she has behaved disgracefully."

"But, surely, Hilda dear, now that she has broken with Mrs. Prentice, and on account of this very thing, and wants to see Mrs. Redcliffe—and you—to say how sorry she is about it all, and for her share in it ——"

"How do you know she wants to say that? Supposing she just comes into the house—practically at our invitation—and tries to lord it over mother, as seems to be her nature, from everything we know about her —— Of course, it is awkward for her having us here, who don't want to have anything to do with her. It hurts her dignity, and she would like to put herself in the right. No, Norah, I don't like Lady Wrotham, and the less mother and I have to do with her the better."

Whether Norah would have been able to make any impression on this attitude, and peace and goodwill would have been brought about by her efforts, cannot be known. It is probable that they would. But it was not to be. Hilda was sitting in the corner of one pew, and Norah standing behind her in another, both of them with their backs to the door. When Hilda had given vent to her feelings in a clear voice, both of them were startled by another voice behind them.

"Then there will not be the slightest difficulty about your having your way."

What unfortunate chance had brought Lady Wrotham to that (by her) little-frequented spot at that moment? Exercised with the details of her campaign against the Vicar, she had chosen a time when she thought few people would be likely to be about the church, to walk into it and refresh her memory about certain details of altar furniture and the like, and had entered unheard just in time to hear herself denounced in the words above recounted.

Hilda turned round and faced her scornfully. Norah looked deeply distressed, but was too much at a loss for words.

"Of course you are Miss Redcliffe," said the great lady, steadying herself with her stick, and holding herself in an upright and stately manner in spite of her lameness and her lack of inches. "I should have overlooked your previous rudeness, as I wished to do all that lay in my power to put an end to this disagreeable business. But I cannot overlook this. I had supposed that what was repeated to me was exaggerated. I now see that it was not so. You are a very rude and impertinent girl."

Hilda flushed, and would have retorted hotly, but Norah stopped her. "Don't say anything, Hilda," she pleaded; "you will only be sorry for it afterwards. Lady Wrotham, I am very sorry you came in just then. We were only just beginning to talk it over, and ——"

"I am very glad I did come in," said Lady Wrotham uncompromisingly. "I now see that any efforts I could make towards a better understanding would be useless, and I shall not attempt to make them. I will leave Miss Redcliffe to herself, but I shall be glad to have a word with you, Mrs. O'Keefe, outside." She turned and limped majestically through the door.

Norah hesitated, but Hilda said, "Oh, go and talk to her, and make friends for yourself. She is much better worth

knowing than we are. Only don't apologize for me, for I meant every word I said, and would say them again."

"I shall go, and I shall come back again," Norah said, and left her.

Lady Wrotham was walking slowly along the churchyard path. She turned round as Norah came out of the porch. "You see," she said angrily, "it is no use going any farther. All my efforts towards conciliation are just thrown in my face. That girl is impossible. You must consider my intention of yesterday withdrawn. I shall do nothing more."

"Oh, but, Lady Wrotham," pleaded Norah. "Mrs. Redcliffe said that she would be pleased to see you, and I ——"

"I can't see Mrs. Redcliffe without seeing her daughter, and that I will not do, to lay myself out for further impertinence. I have done with the Redcliffes. I am sick of them. I wish to hear nothing more about them. They must take their way, and I will take mine. Don't mention their name to me again. I want you to come to luncheon with me, and to go for a long drive with me afterwards. It is a lovely day, and we will go into the forest."

"Thank you, Lady Wrotham," said Norah, "but I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Oh, you have an engagement. But ——"

"No, I have no engagement. But the Redcliffes are my friends, and now is the time that I must be with them, and not with those who are at enmity with them."

"What! You think that girl was right to speak of me in that way?"

"I don't say so. But, right or wrong, they are my friends, and I love them."

"Then you mean that you refuse to be a friend of mine?"

"I should be glad to be a friend of yours. But I can't as long as you are against them."

She was very pretty, standing in front of the great little lady

with a flush on her cheeks, and an air of half-regretful boldness, but Lady Wrotham was not now affected by her prettiness. She turned away in an undisguised rage.

"Very well, then," she said over her shoulder as she stumped off. "You may do as you please, and I don't want to see you any more."

And so ended at the same time Norah's attempt at mediation and her short alliance with Lady Wrotham.

CHAPTER XXVI

ARRIVALS

WHAT Mr. Prentice in the pulpit might have called, and probably did call, the glad season of Whitsuntide, not only brought the pleasant feeling that summer had definitely arrived, if not by the almanac, by its gift of flowers and foliage, genial warmth and long days, but to the Manor of Exton some increase of population. It brought Mr. Dale to the Lodge, very hearty and pleased with himself and with everything he found there, and with him came Mrs. Dale, pleased, too, at the change in her surroundings, but pleased in a more placid manner; and Lotty and Mary and Ada and Tom and Peter and Gladys Dale, likewise pleased, quietly, vociferously, complacently or riotously, according to their several natures. It brought Mr. and Mrs. Ferraby to the other Lodge, two miles away in the forest, and with them a house party as large as it could be made consistent with the comfort demanded by the smart and lively people from amongst whom Mr. and Mrs. Ferraby's friends were chiefly drawn. It brought to the Abbey, Lord Wrotham, who had announced his intention of spending a week there the day before he actually arrived, and it brought, after due notice and consideration on both sides, Lady Syde, the widow of the late Lord Wrotham's younger brother, General Sir Franklin Syde, K.C.B.

Lord Wrotham arrived at the Abbey early in the afternoon while his mother was out for her afternoon drive. Her absence, however, did not appear to cause him much regret, and he had not been in the house more than five minutes

when he was out of it again and making his way across the park towards the White House.

Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda were sitting under the shade of a lime tree on the lawn working and reading. Hilda looked up as the little wicket gate which gave entrance from the park into the garden shut to, and saw him coming. "Mother," she said, in some perturbation, "here is Lord Wrotham. What shall we do?"

There was nothing to be done but to await his coming. "Here I am, you see," he said, when he was within speaking distance. "Just come down and having a look round. How are you, Mrs. Redcliffe? How are you, Miss Redcliffe? Jolly weather, isn't it! And how has the world been using you?"

It might have been rather difficult to give him an answer to that question, if he had required one. But apparently he did not, for he went on without pausing, "Ripping garden you've got here. Just the place to sit in on sunny afternoons and enjoy yourself."

"Hilda, fetch Lord Wrotham another chair," said Mrs. Redcliffe.

Hilda got up to do so. "No, don't you trouble. I'll fetch it," he said.

"You don't know where they are," said Hilda, and walked across the lawn towards the house, which gave him the opportunity of accompanying her.

Hilda broke in upon some pleasant nothings that he began to say to her, looking at him with clear eyes. "I ought to tell you," she said, "that we are not friends with Lady Wrotham. In fact, we don't know her and are not likely to. She did something that I think was very wrong of her, and she overheard me say something about her that she was angry about."

"Dear me, that's a bad job," he said. "Still, as long

as I don't overhear you saying something about me that I should be angry about—but you wouldn't do that, would you?"

He looked at her out of the corners of his eyes with an expression that made her laugh, rather against her will. "You are so funny," she said, "that I can't help laughing at whatever you say. But this has not been a laughing matter to us, and I don't know that you ought to come here, considering the terms we are on with Lady Wrotham. Does she know that you have come?"

They were standing by the door of a shed in which garden accessories were kept, and she seemed in no hurry to get one of the chairs that were in it and return to the lawn. Neither was he in a hurry.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't seen her yet," he said. "I've only just got down, and she's out driving. But what has she been saying to upset you? Don't you go to her meetings?"

"It isn't that. She—she, oh, I don't know how to tell you. But mother said she thought you must have known—about—about her marriage."

"Oh, lor, yes, I know all about it. But surely she hasn't been making a fuss about that!"

"She has, and she told it to a horrible woman, the wife of the Vicar, who actually told us that we ought to be driven out of the place because of it."

"Well, upon my word, that's pretty thick. She'll be driven out of the place herself if she isn't careful. Look here, Miss Redcliffe, I'll make it up between you and my mother. She likes to have her own way about things, and if people don't knuckle under to her, she's quite capable of making it unpleasant for them; but she's not as bad as all that. I mean that she wouldn't lay into people because of —well, what you've told me."

"I don't think I want it made up, thank you. I'm bound to say that mother would have done so. She's so good, and can't bear being at enmity with anybody. And Lady Wrotham did arrange to come up here to see mother. I don't know whether she would have put it all straight or only just made it a little less awkward for herself by coming. But she heard me say that I didn't want to see her. I said it to Mrs. O'Keefe in the church, and Lady Wrotham came in and heard me. She was very angry, and, I believe, washed her hands of us from that moment."

"Well, it's a great pity, and the loss is hers."

"I ought to tell you," Hilda went on, "that mother was not pleased about what had happened. She thought that Lady Wrotham had only meant to be kind in suggesting that she should come here and see mother. But I don't know. I shouldn't have cared to risk it. I will stand up for mother against anybody, even where she won't stand up for herself. And I can't pretend to be altogether sorry that it happened as it did."

"You're quite right, Miss Redcliffe. Still, we must try and put things straight somehow. I say, let's go and have a look at those flowering shrubs up there. I'm a whale on flowering shrubs. We've got a lot of them at Hurstbury."

Hilda hesitated a moment, and then consented to appease his passion for flowering shrubs. They went up the hill behind the house to a little stretch of wild garden, but, having arrived there, Lord Wrotham seemed to have lost some of his horticultural fervour, and the flowering shrubs attracted less attention from him than Hilda herself. He was quite in his element, and made rapid headway in his intimacy with her, and in such a manner that she talked and laughed with him as she had hardly done since Lady Wrotham and Mrs. Prentice had brought strife to the White House; recovered some of her naturally high spirits, and was as near to falling in love with

the gaiety and happy temper of her companion as he might have wished, if his attitude to her was to be taken as a guide, that she should fall in love with himself.

Mrs. Redcliffe, still at her needlework under the lime tree, looked up with a smile of pleasure as she heard Hilda's clear laugh on their way back across the lawn to join her, Lord Wrotham carrying an extra basket-chair on his head. She had not heard her laugh like that for a long time. But a shade of anxiety was on her face too as she looked at them, caused by something in her secret thoughts.

Lord Wrotham stayed to tea and made himself unaffectedly and delightfully at home. And he stayed for half-an-hour after tea was over. When at last he did find it incumbent on him to take his departure, he suggested that the ladies should stroll across the park with him towards the Abbey. This invitation was refused, but they walked with him to the little gate in the fence and bade him farewell, still on a note of laughter and friendliness.

My lord walks home quickly, brushing off the yellow dust of the buttercups as he goes, swinging his stick in a blithe and happy mood. Once he stops under the evening shade of a tall elm to run his eye over a group of farm horses gratefully cropping the cool May grasses after their day's work. He gives them no more than a moment's inspection, but walks on again swinging his stick with his eyes on the ground. The grey walls of the old Abbey front him, the most beautiful of the three fine houses he calls his own, set like a jewel in the midst of woods and fields, red roofs and shining water, and his lordship's pleasant young face is thoughtful. He turns back to take a look at the pretty, spacious cottage he has left. One side of it can be seen through the trees, its windows shining in the light of the westering sun, as if they were eyes, contemplating calmly, but unemulously, across the stretch of grass land its more stately neighbour. What if he should bridge the

distance between the two by ——? He hardly formulates the idea, but his eager mind allows it entrance amongst all the other thronging interests and excitements that occupy him. It may come to be thought over. For the present, seize the day and rely as little as may be on the morrow.

The Dale family has taken possession of their new house and all is bustle and business and pleasurable anticipation at the Lodge. Mr. Dale with his coat off and a large cigar, decked with a waistcoat of red and gold stamped paper, in his mouth, his own capacious fancy waistcoat, bound across by a heavy chain, hardly less resplendent, is directing the hanging of his collection of real oil paintings, bought, as he will tell you, to please himself and not the critics, which assuredly they would not have done. Some are to go in the hall and some in the dining-room. The water-colours for the drawing-room and the engravings for the library and breakfast-room will come next, but the real oil paintings now possess all his mind, and he is giving loud, minute, frequently contradictory, but always good-tempered instructions to the two men in green baize aprons who are there to carry them out. He is not above lending a hand himself where he thinks it is wanted, and occasionally mounts the first few steps of the step-ladder with extreme caution to do so, but does not trust himself on the higher altitudes. He is quite happy and would not have had the appalling confusion around him reduced, without his taking part in its reduction, for anything.

Mrs. Dale is engaged in bringing order out of chaos in the linen and china closets, going about her work with a placidity that only disguises the thoroughness and capability which she is bringing to bear on her task. She is assisted by two cheerful, broad-faced North country maids and by Ada, her second daughter, who is domestically inclined. Lotty, the eldest, is also domestically inclined, but her domesticity is at present

submerged in a haze of love-sickness, and she has retired to her room to snatch a few undisturbed moments for the perusal of a letter which she already knows by heart. She is not so pleasurably excited at the family's move to Exton as the rest of them, was indeed rather averse to it, as removing her from the object of her affections, but looks forward to leaving it again in a few months' time, and thinks that after all a real country wedding will be preferable to being married from a suburb of Manchester.

Mary, the third daughter, is putting her own room into order, leaving off every now and then to look out of the window at the woods and the river. She is artistically inclined, and thinks there ought to be plenty of "bits to sketch."

Tom, with a briar pipe in his mouth, in knickerbockers, as is only fitting in the country, and brown boots with boxcloth spats, strolls down to have a look at the river, which he inspects with a knowing air, and shouldn't be surprised if you couldn't get a bit of sport there with a fly, as if the mysteries of fly-fishing were an open book to him, which they are not, the only kind of book which he thoroughly understands being that with which he is rapidly forming a useful acquaintance in his father's office. He will go back to Manchester in a day or two and work like the capable young business man he is, but in the meantime he is a country gentleman's son and must play the part, or as near as he can get to it. His remarks are received with reverence, as of an oracle, by his younger brother Peter, who shadows him everywhere, and by Gladys, Peter's twin, who shadows Peter.

In the midst of the picture-hanging Browne walks in, and is received with vociferous warmth. Mr. Dale, not sorry for the short respite from his labours, suggests liquid refreshment, which Browne accepts. Mr. Dale lifts his glass before drinking from it, and says, "Well, here's luck, Mr.—er. I hope we shall see you here very often. It'll be Liberty Hall, and

you'll ask for what you like and have what you like." Browne makes suitable acknowledgments. He is in a state of heat, and is anxious to discover, if he can do so without putting a direct question, whether his suspicions as to Mr. Dale's being a Radical and a Dissenter are well founded.

He finds that they are. Mr. Dale is not ashamed of his religion or of his political principles; it does not occur to him that he has anything to be ashamed of, and he makes no attempt to soften them for the benefit of Browne, not perceiving the advisability of doing so. "We shall go to church, as a rule," he says, "because there doesn't seem to be a Cause here as yet. When I get to know my way about a bit, I dare say I shall find some people who agree with me, and we'll build a chapel. I expect I shall have to find most of the money, but I shan't mind that. I dare say your people will give me a site, Mr.—er—Browne, eh?" Browne does not think that they will. He thinks it would be a pity to draw the people away from the Church and make divisions, and he hopes Mr. Dale will think better of it. Mr. Dale says that where he comes from, one man is as good as another, whatever place of worship he attends, and he hopes it will be so here. Browne says it is so, but doesn't mean it.

As for his Radicalism, Mr. Dale makes no disguise of it. He asks all sorts of questions about the Liberal Association, which Browne finds it difficult to answer, never having heard of that body since he has been at Exton. Mr. Dale is afraid that Liberalism must be in a bad way in this neighbourhood, and proposes to do what he can to better its way. Browne says they have always been good Conservatives in Exton, and Mr. Coventry, their member, is a good sportsman and a capital good chap besides, and it would be a thousand pities to turn him out. Mr. Dale asks whether he is an active politician, and Browne is obliged to confess that he is not, as he doesn't care about it, goes to the House of Commons as

seldom as possible, and never opens his mouth when he gets there. Mr. Dale asks whether Browne thinks that is the sort of man who ought to represent a constituency, and Browne says he does. Mr. Dale disagrees with him, says they must put up somebody to fight Mr. Coventry, and intimates that he is ready to be put up himself if nobody better can be found. However, political differences needn't make people any the less good friends, and again, this is Liberty Hall, and Browne will be welcome whenever he likes to come. Mr. Dale returns to his picture-hanging, and Browne takes his departure, groaning and perspiring.

Mr. and Mrs. Ferraby bring their Whitsuntide party down to Forest Lodge in a specially reserved saloon carriage, and transport them from the station in motor-cars already sent down by road. Their guests number about half-a-dozen, and each of them has been warned that their entertainment will take the form of a picnic, as Forest Lodge is a poky little place, merely a rough shooting-box. The picnic, however, does not involve any serious discomfort to the picnickers. Their rooms are furnished luxuriously. Their bodily wants are attended to by a French *chef* and three or four men-servants. There are motor-cars in which they can be taken in any direction they wish to go, and there is a steam yacht anchored in the river just below Warren's Hard, and a racing cutter for those who prefer to be blown by the winds of heaven rather than propelled by steam, lying off Harben Pier, six miles away. So that on the whole the drawbacks of ordinary picnics have been successfully surmounted.

Mr. and Mrs. Ferraby are both comparatively young. Mr. Ferraby, despite his comparative youth, is a power in financial circles in the City. He is considered sound as well as enterprising. He may be seen driving along the Thames Embankment in an electric brougham at about ten o'clock on most mornings during the London season, studying a pink

paper, and returning at about seven reading a green one. He may also be seen at most places of resort frequented by the smartest of smart people, during the night, for both Mr. and Mrs. Ferraby are popular members of that class of society which is preached against in pulpits and lectured against in newspapers, and whose names and movements are made familiar to the world by the same papers which lecture them. How Mr. Ferraby succeeds in keeping, and even enhancing, his reputation as a sound financier, and making a regular appearance at Ascot, and Goodwood, and Cowes, and other places where the more leisured of his acquaintances disport themselves, as well as an occasional appearance on the Riviera, or at Biarritz, or at a foreign Spa, staying at country houses in England and Scotland and Ireland in the Autumn, and shooting over the preserves he has rented at Exton, must be decided by the initiated, but he undoubtedly does so, and makes a great deal of money besides. As he does not give up the whole of his life to amusing himself, and Mrs. Ferraby, in the intervals of flying about from one place to another, dressing herself and playing Bridge, manages to dispose of some of her husband's superfluous income, and, what is more to the point, some of her own crowded hours, in the service of public charities; and as both of them are always cheerful and friendly, and are much given to hospitality, not entirely of the kind that expects some return, perhaps they are not amongst the worst members of their much decried and much advertised set.

They arrive at Forest Lodge in time to dress for a conveniently late dinner, and the house is immediately filled with noise and laughter, which sinks again into temporary silence as each member of the party retires into his or her separate chamber. The guests with one exception are as smart as host and hostess. There is Prince Alexis Orvinski, who is very much at home in English society, and prefers England to Russia,

where he is liable to receive attentions of an explosive character. There is the Earl of Bridgwater, supporting the separation from his Countess, who has gone to stay at another house farther down the line, with exemplary fortitude. She travelled down by the same train as he, although neither of them knew it till the fast train was moving out of Greathampton Station, when she put her hand out of the window and waved him a greeting. There is Lady Buttermere, also temporarily separated from her husband, he being in Paris, and also supporting the separation with resignation. There is Mrs. Lancing, who has got rid of her husband altogether, through the agency of a judge and jury, and has so far resisted the temptation to acquire another. Both these ladies have attained the rank of beauties, with the help of the illustrated papers, in which their photographs are constantly appearing for the benefit of those who would otherwise be in the painful position of constantly reading about them without knowing what they are like. There is Major Laurence Syde, of Her Majesty's Brigade of Guards, the cousin of Lord Wrotham's who has already been mentioned, a very handsome man, whose good looks and agreeable manners are generally supposed to be devoted to the capturing of a prize in the matrimonial market. If they are they have not yet been successful, possibly because his requirements, which embrace birth and beauty as well as large and unfettered wealth, are too exacting.

And lastly there is Sir Francis Redcliffe, who does not belong to the smart set, spending most of his time as he does in the management of his country estate, and in the pursuit of country sports and pastimes. He is the youngest of the party; his age is not more than eight and twenty. He is a tall, healthy-looking young man, rather solemn and rather slow, and seems to be quite out of place at this particular picnic, as the life he habitually lives includes very few of the interests which provide the rest of the picnickers with their subjects of conversa-

tion. But he makes himself at home all the same, and the lady picnickers show a generous desire to put him at his ease, finding his solemnity amusing and his slowness restful. Perhaps they would not be so generous if he were not so good-looking, not with the elaborate and cultivated good looks of a man of fashion like Major Syde, who is so handsome and so well-dressed that he would be noticed in any company, but good-looking in the quiet, unpretentious fashion of a healthy young Englishman, who thinks nothing about his features and very little about his clothes. He has a good pair of eyes, and there is a straightforward, unafraid look in them which the lady picnickers find attractive, and for which they forgive him a disconcerting disregard of their own obvious attractions.

Sir Francis Redcliffe is accustomed to ask for anything that he wants if he thinks he is justified in asking for it, and he has asked for this invitation from Mrs. Ferraby for reasons which will be disclosed. Mrs. Ferraby's family are neighbours of Sir Francis Redcliffe's in Worcestershire. She likes him, and is always ready to do a kindness to anybody, so here he is, making one of his rare appearances in fashionable society, and ready, for all his solemnity, to take his part in whatever goes forward to the best of his ability.

CHAPTER XXVII

A DINNER-PARTY AT FOREST LODGE

Mr. and Mrs. Ferraby being accustomed to spend most of their waking hours in the midst of a crowd, and being so unused to eating their dinner except in company that they would hardly be able to eat it at all if condemned to a solitude of two, it was only natural that Mrs. Ferraby should increase the number at her dinner-table on the first evening of their arrival by inviting Lord Wrotham and Norah O'Keefe and Browne and Turner to take their seats at it. Eight people could be dined in great comfort with as much elbow-room as could be desired, and twelve could not, but possibly the picnic appearance of the occasion, on which Mrs. Ferraby laid such stress, was helped out by the crush, and at any rate there was no lack of gaiety or noise when the diners did at last squeeze themselves into their places, at about nine o'clock, even if they were a trifle too close to one another.

It was significant of that ready good nature and adaptability which made the Ferrabys popular amongst their friends that they should have been as ready to offer hospitality to their quiet country neighbours as to their smart London acquaintance. Lord Wrotham was invited not exactly as a country neighbour, and Norah O'Keefe had gone about in London and elsewhere before her husband's death, and would have been welcome anywhere; but Browne and Turner, the one a life-long bucolic and the other a recluse, had no connections whatever with any part of the life led by the Ferrabys, except their occasional picnics, and were there as country neighbours only. The fact that they both accepted all the invitations to the Forest Lodge that were tendered them, and enjoyed themselves

when they got there, may be taken as a proof that the hospitality of the Ferrabys was based upon a genuine liking for their fellow-creatures, as all hospitality should be, and that their general popularity was not undeserved.

Browne and Turner arrived punctually at half-past eight, the hour at which they had been asked to arrive, and were shown into an empty drawing-room.

"Not down yet," said Browne.

"No, and won't be for another quarter of an hour," said Turner. "Can't think what you were in such a hurry to get off for."

"I'm hungry," said Browne simply. "I say, I wonder why they haven't asked the Redcliffes. They gen'ly do."

"You said that coming along—three times. You always do say everything three times. How should I know?"

"I hope Mrs. Ferraby hasn't heard anything about this business, and is standing off."

"You've said that three times too, if not four, and I told you Mrs. Ferraby wasn't that sort."

Sir Francis Redcliffe came into the room at that moment, and there was some hesitation as to whether he should be accepted at once as a man and a brother, or ignored until a due introduction should render him so *ex officio*. He solved the difficulty himself by remarking that it was a fine evening, and having thus matriculated in approved fashion, was allowed to proceed to the higher degrees without further loss of time.

"Do you know my cousins, the Redcliffes, who live here?" he asked presently, when he had discovered that Browne and Turner were residentiary, and not migratory like himself.

Browne stared at him, and Turner said, "Yes. Particular friends of ours—both of us. Thought they hadn't any relations in England, though."

"My name's Redcliffe," said Sir Francis. "George Redcliffe was a first cousin of my father's. I didn't know they

were in England until a week or two ago, or I should have looked them up. Wrotham told me. I ran up against him in town a week ago. I'm going to look them up to-morrow. She's a nice woman, isn't she ? "

" One of the best that ever stepped," said Turner. " Very glad you're going to see her."

Sir Francis seemed about to say something, but apparently changed his mind.

" Mrs. Ferraby likes her, I think," said Browne tentatively.

" Oh, yes. She likes her very much. She's asked them to dine here to-morrow. Would have asked them to-night, but I wanted to go and see her first."

Again he appeared as if he had something else to say, but he was interrupted by the entrance of Norah O'Keefe, looking so beautiful that Browne and Turner both drew in their breaths, and even Francis Redcliffe was impressed, and wondered who she could be.

Mr. Ferraby came in, genial and alert. " You know what we are here," he said by way of apology, " always behind time. And how are you, Mrs. O'Keefe ? Not quite taken root yet, eh ? We're going to take you all over the place while we're here. How do, Browne ? How do, Turner ? Browne, you're getting fat. Mrs. O'Keefe, let me introduce Sir Francis Redcliffe. He's come here to dig out his long-lost cousins. Mrs. Patrick O'Keefe. Well, Turner, not got tired of the fish yet, eh ? "

Lord Bridgwater came in. He recognized Mrs. O'Keefe and shook hands with her, but she soon hurried back to Francis Redcliffe, with whom she had been in conversation. Lord Bridgwater recognized Turner. " Hulloa, Diogenes," he said, " who'd have thought of seeing you after all these years ? I should have known your solemn old visage anywhere. Last time we met—let's see ——"

" Was when you'd got more hair on your head than you

have now," said Turner. "You've become a big man since then, Tubby. Thank you for not being too proud to know me."

"You old fraud!" said Bridgwater, digging him in the ribs. "Still as hard-headed and soft-hearted as ever, eh?"

Prince Orvinski and Major Syde came in. "Is that Sidey Syde?" said Turner, "or do my eyes deceive me? He was my fag at Bourdon's." The prince was introduced to Mrs. O'Keefe. Laurence Syde looked as if he would like to be, but as the Russian was paying her stiff-backed compliments, which would take him some time to bring to a successful issue, he cast his eyes over the other men in the room and lighted upon Turner. "Hulloa, Diogenes!" he said coolly, "run you to earth at last. Thought you'd gone under altogether. How are you?"

"I'm very well, thank you, Sidey," replied Turner. "Varnish factory still going strong?"

Laurence's reply was lost in a rustle of skirts as Mrs. Ferraby and Lady Buttermere swept into the room. Mrs. Ferraby went straight to Norah O'Keefe, greeted her warmly, and then shook hands with Browne and Turner, smiling and talking all the time. Lady Buttermere looked round for Mrs. Lancing, and seemed disappointed to find that she herself was not the last arrival, which she might very well have been, as it was already ten minutes to nine. The room was full of talk and laughter, when Lord Wrotham made his appearance, cool and fresh, and grinning with sheer affability. He was very soon talking and laughing as loudly as any one, and had singled out Norah O'Keefe as the most fitting recipient of his spirited excursions, showing Prince Orvinski the shape of a British shoulder, and quite eclipsing Francis Redcliffe, who stood in a corner behind them and looked lost.

It was just upon half-an-hour past the appointed hour for dinner, which had already been announced in a hopeless kind

of way by the butler, as who should say, "I mention this as it is my duty to do so, but without the slightest expectation of being attended to." All the ladies were still chattering gaily, but the men had begun to finger their waistcoats and look round them, when the door opened to admit Mrs. Lancing, who came in quietly, but with an air of complacence, as much as to say, "I think I've done it this time." A moment's pause in the torrent of chatter from all except Lady Buttermere, who had her back turned to the door, and kept it there, was her reward. Certainly Mrs. Lancing's get-up, if not eminently suitable for a picnic, was worth the strenuous hour she had spent over it. It drew a momentary appraising glance from Mrs. Ferraby and Norah O'Keefe, and it performed the curious operation of slightly opening the mouths of the men in the room. It so impressed Lord Bridgwater that he was able to describe it a few weeks later to Lady Bridgwater, when they met unexpectedly under the beeches at Goodwood, and had a few minutes' quiet chat. "Chiffon," he said, "of a sort of green you never see. Just that and some pearls in her hair; you know her hair—sort of shining copper. But, by Jove, it was stunning!"

They went into the dining-room, and the butler stood by the door, and looked at them with mournful eyes. "It is all very well," he seemed to say, "but I have no illusions left about you. You are nothing but froth, and I know a good deal more about you than you think." But even he cast a semi-approving glance at Mrs. Lancing, and seemed to correct his judgment, and to be saying, "Well, perhaps you have your uses as ornamental accessories to a dinner-table, arranged as only I can arrange it."

There were only four ladies to eight men. Mrs. Ferraby and Prince Orvinski sat side by side at the head of the table, and Mr. Ferraby and Lady Buttermere at the foot. On the prince's right was Mrs. Lancing, and then Lord Bridgwater,

Browne, and Francis Redcliffe. On Mrs. Ferraby's left were Lord Wrotham, who had Norah O'Keefe next to him, and beyond her were Laurence Syde and Turner. Everybody talked loudly except Francis Redcliffe and Browne and Turner. The sad butler lost no time in inciting them to further efforts, assisted by one of his satellites, and as he whispered interrogatively, "Champagne?" seemed to add, "I ask you as a matter of form. You are nothing but froth, and this is your fitting refreshment."

The talk swelled into a hurricane, which filled the room and passed out through the open windows into the quiet night, and seemed to stir the trees of the forest into uneasy protest. Every now and then it subsided a little, as groups of two or three withdrew themselves from the general conversation, like small bubbles breaking off from a cluster of bubbles, and then coming back to it. Prince Orvinski and Mrs. Lancing were periodically confidential, and sometimes Prince Orvinski addressed himself to his hostess while Lord Bridgwater and Mrs. Lancing talked together. Wrotham and Laurence Syde, on either side of Norah O'Keefe, vied with one another to monopolize her attention. Francis Redcliffe and Browne found one another stimulating on the subject of estate management. Mr. Ferraby and Lady Buttermere chaffed each other, and Turner threw in an occasional contribution to their babble of wit, or insisted upon Laurence Syde's attention, as he advised him to follow his own example and settle down in an out-of-the-way country place, where he needn't trouble about his clothes or be bothered with women. The Guardsman took this advice in good part, laughed at his adviser, and gave him back as good as he received.

But these interludes were only momentary. The big group of bubbles hung together for the most part, and if it is true that laughter is the best possible aid to digestion, the Ferrabys' *chef* was justified in ignoring the possibilities of that complaint

following after a dinner that would have put to shame any picnic caterer since the days of Lucullus.

When the ladies had left the room, Mr. Ferraby went to the other end of the table, but by and by Lord Wrotham and his cousin detached themselves from the group he had formed and talked together. It was easy to see that the younger man, good-natured and simple, in spite of his position in the world, and his numerous energies and pursuits, was under the influence of his brilliant and self-possessed elder, looked up to him as a pattern of experienced manhood, and deferred to his opinions. "I say, she's a topping little lady, Mrs. O'Keefe," he said, but he said it not in the way he would have said it to a friend of his own age, but tentatively, with his eye on his cousin's face, as if he was ready to defer to his opinion, even in such matters as these, with which he was more than usually competent to deal.

"Don't you go making a fool of yourself with her, Kem," said the other.

"Oh, lor', no," said Wrotham, as if it was the last thing that would have entered his mind. "But, I say, old chap, you seemed a bit taken with her yourself, what?"

Laurence turned his eyes calmly upon him. "You're talking through your hat," he said coldly, and Wrotham hastened to apologize for his indiscretion.

Three Bridge-tables were brought into the drawing-room after dinner, which was about as many as it would hold, but only one of them was occupied until after the country neighbours had left, and the rest sang songs round the piano, or talked in corners. Laurence Syde, somewhat inconsistently, devoted himself to the entertainment of Norah O'Keefe, in the quietest corner that could be found, and that was not very quiet. To judge by her frequent trills of laughter, he met with considerable success in his undertaking, and Wrotham, with his hands in his pockets, singing lustily, with frequent

glances in their direction, could neither dislodge them from their stronghold to join in the music, nor insinuate himself into their company.

He had his reward, however, later, when by what he considered a most fortunate interference of Providence, Norah's coachman was discovered to have succumbed to the pervading hospitality of the house while waiting for his mistress, and to be incapable of driving her home. He immediately offered to do so in his mother's carriage, the charioteer of which was proof, perhaps in his head, perhaps in his morals, against the temptation, and drove off with her amidst a chorus of talk and laughter from the assembled guests, amongst whom he caught a glimpse of his cousin's face, dark and annoyed, as he pushed up the window, and the dejected countenances of Browne and Turner, whose offers at accommodation had been put lightly aside.

The house party went back to their Bridge, which now became a serious affair, and lasted until long after the average picnicker would have been wrapt in slumber; lasted, indeed, until those most inveterate of picnickers, the birds, were beginning to bestir themselves for another day in the open, and Sir Francis Redcliffe was so sleepy that he revoked three times in as many games, and lost his final rubber, and a good deal of money besides.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A VISIT AND A CONVERSATION

IT was with some surprise that Mrs. Redcliffe received the next morning a letter from her husband's kinsman, written from London the day before, in which he said that he had only lately heard from Lord Wrotham of her being in England, or he should have hoped to make her acquaintance before, as she and her daughter must be the only relations he had on his father's side. He was going down to stay with the Ferrabys for a few days that afternoon, and would like to see her, and would come, if she had no objection, the next morning about eleven o'clock.

"I only heard of him as a very small boy from your father," said Mrs. Redcliffe to Hilda. "I think he must be twenty-seven or eight now. It is a kind letter. I shall be glad to see him."

Hilda was not so sure. She was inclined to be suspicious. "Does he know?" was in her thoughts, but she kept them to herself, and decided to hold a watchful attitude when her cousin did come. Lord Wrotham's name introduced into the letter inclined her on the whole to leniency. Lord Wrotham was kindness and thoughtfulness itself, and had probably asked this young man to do what he could to soften down the unpleasantness which he knew she and her mother were undergoing. Full credit must be given to Lord Wrotham, of course, for his probable endeavours; but it remained to be seen whether Sir Francis Redcliffe had responded to them out of mere complacency, or with a genuine desire to take his stand by his relations against the world. If the former, she was sure she would find him out very soon, and in that case

he would not be welcome. But his letter *was* a nice one. She could not deny that, and hoped on the whole that he might acquit himself to her satisfaction.

He came about half-past eleven, in a motor-car, and apologized for being late. "We didn't breakfast much before eleven," he said, "and I couldn't get away." He seemed to think it of importance to have something definite to say as he came in, and at first Hilda was doubtful of him. He was awkward, or if not exactly awkward, nervous and shy. He held himself very straight and did not smile as he greeted them, and when he sat down in an easy-chair, which he did upon Mrs. Redcliffe's invitation, he sat forward with his elbows resting on his knees and played with his cap as if he were not at his ease. But presently he became more so, and it was quite plain that his nervousness and shyness were only attributable to his doubt as to whether his coming at all would be agreeable to them, and did not arise from any doubt on his own behalf; and by and by, when he laughed, Hilda accepted him as a cousin at once, for his laugh was honest and free and compelled liking.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I didn't know I had any relations on my father's side. He died when I was a baby and my mother died when I was born. When Wrotham told me about you I looked it up in the books, but they only told me that my father had a first cousin, and his regiment, and his being A. D. C., and so on, but there was nothing more about him. I suppose there was nobody to fill up the papers after my father died. He was the only Redcliffe besides me."

"Your father was dead, I know," said Mrs. Redcliffe, "when my husband was first married to my sister, and of course when he married me a year later." She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, but with a slight change of colour, and Hilda threw a searching glance at him.

"I know," he said in obvious allusion to Mrs. Redcliffe's story rather than to her statement; and that was the only reference to it that passed his lips during his visit. But it was enough. Hilda put away her suspicions once for all, and became more and more kindly disposed towards him as he talked.

"I hope you and Miss Redcliffe," he said, throwing a glance at Hilda as he mentioned her name, "will come and pay me a visit at Riverslea. I'm there pretty nearly always. I don't use all the house myself and I don't often have people staying with me, except a few men to shoot occasionally; but I'll open it in your honour. To tell you the truth I'm rather pleased to find some relations, and I feel inclined to make a lot of them."

It was at this point that he laughed, and after that he leant back in his chair, and talked altogether more easily.

Mrs. Redcliffe was touched by his kindness. "I should much like to come," she said. "And I should like Hilda to see the house. Her father spent many happy days of his childhood there and often talked to me of it."

"It's a dear old place," said Sir Francis; "not one of the show places, you know, but rambling and comfortable, and hardly anything has been altered in it for—oh, I don't know how long—two or three hundred years, perhaps. All the old furniture is there, and there's a beautiful garden. I don't do much with the garden, I'm so busy on the land, but I keep it up. You've got a very pretty garden here." He looked out of the big bow-window on to the lawn and the rose-beds, and the big border of hardy flowers opposite to the house, just beginning to put on its summer dress of colour.

"Yes, it is our hobby, Hilda's and mine," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "We don't know many big gardens, but we are great

readers of gardening books. Shall we go out and see it? I will just go and get a hat."

Hilda was left alone for a minute with her cousin. They eyed one another. Sir Francis seemed to suffer from an access of shyness, but recovered from it sufficiently to say, "I hope you'll be able to come soon; Warwickshire's very jolly in the summer."

"I should love to come," said Hilda. "It is very kind of you to ask us."

Sir Francis's shyness descended on him again. "No, it isn't," he said. "Not a bit."

Mrs. Redcliffe came in from the hall, and they all went out into the garden. "When we've had a look round," said Sir Francis, "I thought perhaps you would both like to come for a sail. Mr. Ferraby's boat is ready at Harben and I've got it for the day, and that motor-car. All the rest of our party have gone on the yacht. I thought we might take Mr. Browne. They have put me up a luncheon basket. We could sail over to the Island and back. The wind is just right."

"It would be delightful," said Mrs. Redcliffe; but Hilda put in, slightly blushing, "Lord Wrotham said he was coming after lunch, mother. He wanted us to go on the river."

Mrs. Redcliffe was silent. She had not been consulted as to this arrangement.

"Wrotham?" said Sir Francis. "He has gone on the yacht. They won't be back till dinner-time."

"He only said he might come," said Hilda hastily. "Do let us go, mother. I love sailing."

"Do you?" said Sir Francis, looking at her with pleasure. "So do I. Especially on the sea. Then you'll come?"

Hilda was determined to go, and grew quite excited at the prospect, but her determination and excitement did not seem to spring from any pleasure in the prospect of the excursion,

although she said they did. Mrs. Redcliffe acquiesced in the proposal.

"I'll just run down to the village and see if I can get hold of Browne, while you are getting ready," said Sir Francis. "They told me he would be at his office."

Browne was duly got hold of. He had a lot of work to do, but thought he might manage it. "I shall be glad to get out for an hour or two and have a blow," he said. "I'm infernally worried here. I say, do you think you'd have room for Turner too? He's just gone up to the post-office. I know he likes a sail, and he likes your cousins."

Sir Francis thought there would be room for Turner. The car was a six-seated one and the boat would hold them all. So Turner was approached on the subject, and presently they all went off together, picking up Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda on the way.

By the time they came home again, late in the afternoon, they had quite taken Sir Francis into their bond of friendship "That's a capital good chap," said Turner in unwonted enthusiasm later on in the evening, as he and Browne were dining together at the Fisheries. "Don't know when I've met a fellow I liked better. Sensible and honest and all that sort of thing, and no side to him, and—and—a thoroughly good chap."

"One of the best," acquiesced Browne, "and I'll tell you a thing that's occurred to me, Turner. I may be right or I may be wrong, but I believe he's come down here on purpose to show that he's ready to back up his relations and to show the spiteful cats that are talking about them that they're good enough for *him*, and —— Mind you, he's never uttered a word about the business, but ——"

"That's a great discovery," interrupted Turner. "You ought to be a detective, Maximilian. You'd make your fortune."

"Well, *I* can see a thing sometimes when it's there in front of me. And there's another thing. I think he's taken an uncommon fancy to Hilda. I may be right or I may be wrong, but that's my impression."

"Well, of course, if you say so—— Of course things that duller fellows mightn't think much of are quite enough for your mighty brain to work on. I did notice myself, that he kept his eyes on her all the time, and seemed to like showing her how to handle a sheet, and talked a lot of what he'd do for her when he got her down to his place—but I can't put two and two together like you can. You're a wonderful fellow, Maximilian."

"Well, I'm a bit slow, but I do notice things. Now that young Fred Prentice has sheered off—and a good job too; he was never good enough for her ——"

"He's a rotter. The cheek of the young fool! However, he's gone. Something happened. I'm sure something happened, though I don't know what. But there's your employer, Browne—you've got to take him into account, in your position—can't afford to be independent. He's in the way too. He was up there directly he came yesterday afternoon. He's smitten. There's not a doubt about it."

"I don't think anything of him. At least, I mean, where that sort of thing is concerned. He's always been like that, running after every pretty girl he sees. It doesn't mean anything."

"Well, I dare say —— I haven't got your powers of observation, but it did occur to me that it means something to Miss Hilda. She wasn't herself to-day—very gay at one time and thinking about something a long way off at others. I hate a fellow who's always dancing about after a petticoat. Wouldn't do it myself, and if I did it wouldn't be one petticoat to-day and another to-morrow."

"I don't know whether you noticed anything last night," said Browne tentatively.

"Oh, no, nothing at all—'cept that I'd got a nose in front of my face."

"Well, I don't know how you feel about it. I know you had ideas about—about the lady in question, whatever you like to say, and I don't mind confessing to you now, that I had some sort of an idea myself. But it's all over now. I feel different about it somehow. I shouldn't care a bit if she married somebody else, 'slong as he was a nice fellow. But what do you feel about it?"

"Considering I've always been advising you to marry her and be done with it, I suppose I feel much the same. What you say about me is all nonsense, and you know it as well as I do. I don't want to marry anybody, and never have wanted to marry anybody. I'm quite contented as I am."

"Well, it'd be funny if Wrotham were to be the man. I don't know what her ladyship'd say. Of course, she won't have anything to do with her ladyship now, because of Mrs. Redcliffe."

"Quite right too. I honour her for it, and so would you if you had the pluck of a mouse."

"I do. I think she's quite right. Well, I say it'd be a funny thing. But I don't know whether you observed—I couldn't help thinking that Major Syde was quite as much struck as Wrotham last night."

"Couldn't you? Well, you have got an eye."

"I've never met him before, although I've often heard of him from Wrotham. He seems agreeable, but I don't know much about him."

"I do. He's agreeable enough on the outside—at least so people seem to think, and especially ladies. He doesn't make much impression on me, because I don't care a damn about outside agreeableness. If I did I shouldn't see much of you. But inside, he's as rotten and selfish and heartless as anybody I know. He was like that as a boy and he's no

better, and probably a good deal worse, as a man. Why, I remember him telling me—I've never forgotten it, though I dare say he has—how his father married a very rich widow for the sake of her money, and the old beast and this precocious young beast put their heads together to turn her against a nephew of hers, who might have stood in their way. He was proud of it, the young swine, and he was never so surprised in his life as when I gave him a good hiding for thinking I was the sort of fellow he could tell a story like that to."

"His father was Sir Franklin Syde, old Lord Wrotham's brother."

"I don't care who he was. He made ducks and drakes of his wife's money and this beauty here helped him. He knows better than to talk about it now, I dare say. But everybody knows the facts."

"Lady Syde is here now. She came to stay at the Abbey this morning."

"Did she? Well, I know nothing about her, except that she was a fool to marry her second husband. But this fellow —God help her if she's taken a fancy to him. He'd spend every penny she's got and then forsake her. There's nothing too bad for him. However, you needn't trouble yourself. He's pretty well on his last legs, and happily she's not big enough game for him to be flying at."

"He's Wrotham's heir, you know, until Wrotham marries and has a boy of his own. Wrotham thinks a lot of him."

"Yes, exactly. And he'll take good care that Wrotham goes on thinking a lot of him, and not only for what he can get out of Wrotham, though that's a good deal, and so you'll find out if you have anything to do with the finances of Wrotham's property. He'll be always at Wrotham's elbow, and if Wrotham shows any signs of wanting to get married, you'll see that Master Sidey Syde will have a word to say

about it, and stop it if he can. I dare say he won't stop it for ever, Wrotham being what he is, but he's a desperate gambler, and it's the sort of throw he'd make. I saw everything you say last night, and perhaps a little bit more. His own powerful attractions are weapons he'll use for all they're worth, and he'll use them as he's used them before, not to get a wife for himself, but to stop Wrotham's getting one. He'll go just far enough with your poor little friend as to get between her and Wrotham, and when Wrotham gets tired of it and goes off after somebody else, he'll go off too. He's a black-hearted scoundrel, and I wish I'd told him so last night instead of putting up with his infernal impudence and pretending to like it. I should have done if I'd had the pluck of a mouse ——"

Browne sat open-mouthed during this tirade, as much on account of Turner's unwonted heat and seriousness as at the disclosure of perfidy almost beyond the grasp of his simple mind. "Well, it seems likely to be a bad business," he said after a pause.

Turner made an impatient motion with his shoulders and returned to his customary mood. "We've had a nice peaceful time since your old woman planted herself down here," he said. "She's managed to set everybody by the ears, I should think in the quickest time on record."

"There's another row brewing," said Browne dejectedly.

"Is there? Well, I should have thought she had got enough to occupy herself with at present. What is it?"

"The Dales came into the Lodge yesterday. She won't like them, and I shall have the deuce of a time with her."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Dale is a Radical and a Dissenter and ——"

"Is he? Is he?" exclaimed Turner delightedly. "I'll go and look him up at once. When do you think I can go and call, Browne? I suppose they're all in a mess now, but

I should think by Monday —— By Jove, yes, I'll go and see him on Monday."

Browne stared at him. "What do you mean?" he said. "You're not a Radical or a Dissenter. You said the other day you would like to duck all the Radicals in the country, and make all the Dissenters kiss the Pope's toe."

"So I should. But I'd let Dale off. We shall get some fun out of Dale. Will he put up a fight, do you think? Oh, I'll go and see him on Monday. Wouldn't miss it for anything."

"I hope to goodness you're not going to make mischief, Turner. It'll be bad enough as it is. He's not a bad old chap, but he's just the sort of man that Lady Wrotham will hate to have in the place; not a gentleman—at least, you know, not what she'd call a gentleman, but pretty satisfied with himself all the same, and no idea of keeping himself quiet."

Turner rubbed his lean hands. "You put new life into me, Maximilian," he said. "I should never have thought you'd have had the sense to get a man like that into the place."

"I wish to goodness I hadn't," said Browne ruefully. "Though I couldn't very well help myself. Oh, I shall chuck it. I shall chuck the whole thing. I haven't had a moment's peace since she came here. If she cuts up rough about the Dales I shall chuck it."

"And I think you said she *would* cut up rough, didn't you? Oh, my immortal aunt! this is the best thing that has happened yet."

Browne turned sulky and refused to pursue the matter further if his information and his wrongs were to be treated in that fashion, but revived under the internal application of a bottle of vintage port, and a phenomenal run of luck at picquet. Turner maintained his spirits throughout the evening and could hardly get through his nightly novel, so interrupted was he by his own fits of chuckling.

CHAPTER XXIX

LADY SYDE HEARS AND ADVISES

Lady Syde, the widow of Major-General the Hon. Sir Franklin Syde, K.C.B., the late Lord Wrotham's younger brother, was a still handsome woman, with snow-white hair and a pair of bright eyes, which, when she became animated in conversation, as she often did, flashed with something of the fire of youth. She must at this time have been nearing seventy, and was younger than Lady Wrotham by some years. Her white hair, and an impression of fatigue about her face and her whole bearing, which was always present unless she talked, when it disappeared entirely, made her look older. It might have seemed to an observer that she had lived a more than usually active life and had grown rather tired of it. Lady Wrotham had lived an active life too, but she had by no means grown tired of it, and would never grow tired of it until she laid it aside altogether.

But when Lady Syde talked and her bright eyes flashed with interest, when her face lost its lines of fatigue, and perhaps of discontent, and became animated, and her voice took on a clear and decisive ring, she seemed years younger than Lady Wrotham, who was neither more nor less interested and animated or decisive at one time than another, but lived on one plane of energy, which, if it had not merged into the weariness of creeping age, had never burnt so brightly as it still occasionally did in her sister-in-law.

Lady Syde had not always occupied the position which she now filled. When she had married her second husband, rather late in life, she had been the widow of a Mr. Moggeridge, a very rich business man, but one of no pretensions to birth and

very few to social status. Her wealth at the time of her second marriage had enabled Sir Franklin's family to overlook the vulgarity of Mr. Moggeridge, who, after all, was dead, and powerless to offend their susceptibilities, and her own cleverness and energy of character had gained her an assured place amongst the numerous high connections of that family. There was a faint tradition that Lady Wrotham had inaugurated the new relationship by attempting to patronize Lady Syde, and had been considerably surprised at the reception her attempt had met with. But that little passage of arms had long since been forgotten, and Lady Wrotham and Lady Syde met as equals and even as intimate friends, neither giving way to the other in the least degree, but both respecting one another's opinions and characters.

The two ladies had much to talk about on this first meeting after Lady Wrotham's settling down at Exton. They discussed the less important matters over the luncheon table and reserved their serious confidences until they were ensconced in the library with their coffee.

"This is a fine house, Sarah," said Lady Syde, looking round her with eager observation. "You must take me over it. It has always been one of my great pleasures, as you know, to arrange an old house, or rearrange a house, or furnish a house, and I believe I should enjoy doing it now just as well as ever. Was there much to do here?"

"No," said Lady Wrotham. "Sir Joseph Chapman, who has occupied it for many years, has done everything that wants doing. It is not in all respects as I should have done it myself, but it does very well, and, beyond having the few things that I care about around me, I am indifferent. I have other things to employ my attention. They would not interest you."

It was an understood thing between them that Lady Syde should not be required to express an interest which she did not

feel in Lady Wrotham's schemes for the reformation of the English Church and Nation. These topics were not introduced into their intercourse, unless they had some bearing on questions that were discussed between them.

"I sincerely hope you have settled down comfortably here," said Lady Syde, "and like your surroundings. The place itself you could hardly help liking."

"I am sorry to say," replied Lady Wrotham, "that almost from the first moment I came here I have been involved in one disagreeable after another. I have had no time to enjoy the beauties of the place, which I *should* enjoy under other circumstances, for my life has been full of worries, owing to the obstinacy and quarrelsomeness of the people here. You would hardly believe, Henrietta, what I have had to put up with."

"Indeed!" said Lady Syde, her eyes brightening. "I should like to hear of your experiences. My sympathy will be yours, even if there is no occasion for me to offer advice."

"I should like to have your advice. It is what I wish. I have had no one to whom I could talk about these matters, and to tell you the truth they are causing me great anxiety. I came to Exton with the full intention and desire to live quietly amongst the people here, and to make friends with them, consistently, of course, with the position I hold, and have a right to expect to be considered."

"Naturally," said Lady Syde. "You would take the lead, and ought to take the lead. Nobody could object to that."

"I am glad to hear you say so; for really, I have met with such complete disregard of it from almost every quarter, that I am beginning to doubt, myself, whether I am anybody to speak of at all, and whether I have the slightest right to expect my wishes to be considered in a place that has been in my husband's family for over three hundred years."

"You need have no doubt about that, Sarah. If I were in your position and met with such perversity from people who ought to know better, I should turn out the whole lot of them to-morrow, and start completely afresh. But tell me the chief cause of your disturbance."

"The chief cause is the Vicar of the parish, who, I consider, obtained his position here in the first instance under false pretences. He is the kind of man who is rapidly wrecking the Church, preaching doctrines and carrying on generally in a way that if it is not stopped will bring this country under the yoke of Rome within another generation. You know what sacrifices I have made to stop this creeping blight, and I say that it is monstrous, intolerable, that in the very place where I make my home, I should have to submit to it from a man who is bound by all honesty and decent feeling—if not by the actual law—to—to do as I tell him."

"Oh, but surely, Sarah, if he refuses to behave as you wish him to behave, you can get rid of him. It would indeed be monstrous if you could not. I am not so well up in these matters as you are. They are not in my line, as you know, and I do not mix myself up in them. But of that I have no doubt whatever. It would be absurd to think that a mere clergyman, tiresome as I know from my own experience they can be, could set up his opinion against yours in a place where you are, or should be, paramount. No law could give him the right to do that. The country would be ruined in no time."

"Unfortunately, the law does give him the right. Unjust as it is, the law is on his side, and I am unable to deny it."

"Then the law ought to be altered. Surely it would be altered if it was realized that it countenanced such an absurdity. One could hardly expect a Radical Government to do it, perhaps, as their enmity to the Church and the upper

classes is notorious. But fortunately we have a Conservative Government in power, and something ought to be done. What is the good of talking about the food of the lower classes—not that I have any objection to the food of the lower classes; it is a very good thing in its proper place—while the country is going to ruin in this way? Something ought to be done about it, and if I were you, Sarah, I should mention it to the Prime Minister. He is amiability itself, and burns with indignation, besides, at any hint of injustice."

"I have no hope of anything really satisfactory being done by the Government," said Lady Wrotham. "Not even the League, influential as it is, has been able to move them. They have done away with a few minor injustices, but the great Church questions they will not touch."

"Very well then, why not apply to the bishop? I have no great opinion of bishops, as a general rule; their aprons always strike me as being a little absurd, and they have usually risen from the ranks. But the bishop of Archester is a gentleman. I have met him more than once, a most delightful man, quite of the old courtly type. He is at the head of this Division, is he not?"

"Yes. And I have applied to him, I am sorry to say, without success. I even asked him and Lady Susan to stay here and discuss the matter quietly after he had seen for himself what goes on. And, would you believe it? I simply received a note from his chaplain saying that his lordship saw nothing to complain about to the Vicar of this parish in what I had told him, except in one matter on which he would communicate to the Vicar himself. And that was all."

"Nothing about your invitation?"

"Simply that his lordship had too many engagements to enable him to accept it."

"Well, I should never have thought he would have behaved like that—and to you. If he had not been who he

is—I mean a brother of Lord Pevensey—one might almost have said it was presumptuous. But surely there must be something left for you to do, Sarah."

Lady Wrotham's face took on a sterner and not a pleasant expression. "Mr. Prentice shall go," she said. "I will use every effort to dislodge him. I will not live in the midst of a community given over to such errors as he practises and teaches."

"I think he should go. I think he should be made to go. Has he a wife and family?"

"He has a wife and, I believe, one son."

"I suppose he can get some other situation. Do they support him in his rebellion?"

"I don't know anything about the son. He does not live here. But Mrs. Prentice has caused me almost more annoyance than her husband. I did hope at one time that she saw how misguided he was and would be of use to me in influencing him for his good. She certainly led me to think so, in a way that I can only think now was hypocritical. I gave her full credit for being sincere and truthful, and even made a companion of her, though she is not a woman of any breeding. Apparently it was simply that that she wanted, for when I took her to task for something I was displeased about in her conduct, she threw off the mask at once, and has ever since opposed me in the most violent way in everything I try to do for the good of the people. She goes about amongst them and tries to dissuade them from attending some meetings that I have got up for their benefit. Fortunately the people do not like her and she has little influence over them. They laugh at her efforts to annoy me and do not respond to them. But fancy, Henrietta, my having to put up with that sort of thing from a woman of her standing! When I pass her out driving she pokes her nose in the air and pretends not to see me."

"Oh, it is outrageous. Certainly she must be sent away. There is not a doubt of it. What was the thing that you had to rebuke her for, first of all?"

"Well, that is another affair altogether, but it has given, and is still giving me infinite annoyance. There is a lady living here called Mrs. Redcliffe. She has a pretty cottage, practically in the park itself—you can see it from the upper windows—a fair-sized house really, with a large garden. Her father was a squatter in Queensland—a gentleman—and she was born and brought up there. Her husband was one of the Warwickshire Redcliffes. He was on the staff of the Governor of Queensland while we were in South Australia, and he married first of all her sister, who died within a year, and then her, and settled out there. I remember the circumstances well, and thought everybody who knew her would have known of them as a matter of course."

"She was the deceased wife's sister."

"Yes. Of course you know that there is no objection to that in the Colonies. They are more advanced there than we are, and delight in passing laws that we should not pass, very often out of mere bravado. Their politicians are of quite a different class to ours. We had considerable difficulty with some of them during our term in Australia; in fact, we were given to understand, in rather an impertinent way through the newspapers, that our province was simply to spend our allowance, and a good deal more besides, in entertaining them, and leave them to manage their own business in their own way. One paper actually went so far as to say that we ought to feel ourselves amply rewarded for all we did by having the National Anthem played whenever we made a public appearance."

"Yes," said Lady Syde, who had heard all this before, and wanted to hear something else. "But there was, at any rate, nothing wrong about this marriage under the circumstances."

"No. And if I had come down here and found Mrs. Redcliffe to be a nice woman in every other way, as I have no reason to believe she is not, I should not have let it make the slightest difference in my treatment of her. But what did not enter into my calculations was that the very fact of her being the deceased wife's sister was not known here. I have not yet quite gathered how she can have succeeded in keeping it to herself, as I have not had the opportunity of speaking to her about it, but that does not very much matter. She had succeeded in keeping it to herself, and I do not in the least blame her for having done so if she could, as, of course, her daughter's position in this country, if not her own, is an invidious one."

"Yes, there has been an attempt to alter the law in that respect. It ought to be altered, I think."

"Perhaps so, to that extent. At any rate, the last thing I should have wished would be to spread her story. But unfortunately, before I knew that it had been kept secret, I inadvertently let it out to this Mrs. Prentice, the Vicar's wife."

"And she spread it. But did you not tell her she was not to do so?"

"I did, most emphatically. But it was all over the place in no time. She has always declared that she said nothing to anybody but her husband, who, I hear, and I will give him that credit, has behaved well about it, and would not have spread it. Mrs. Prentice undoubtedly did so, and I have discovered that she is a peculiarly spiteful woman and is only too glad to have an excuse to persecute this poor lady. For I own, Henrietta, that I am very sorry for her and for what has happened."

"At all events, you are not to blame, Sarah. And you could very easily make amends to her if you wished to do so. I am strongly in favour of a quiet life all round myself; I have had too much experience of the other kind of life. And

I do recommend you, if you can do so conveniently, to take steps."

"My dear Henrietta, I should have done so long ago. But the fact is that the girl, Mrs. Redcliffe's daughter, is not what her mother seems to be. She has been violent about it all through. That I could forgive, as, of course, she would take her mother's part, and I had actually overlooked her saying something abominably rude about me which came to my ears, and was prepared to go and call on Mrs. Redcliffe, when I accidentally overheard her repeating her offence in a way that I could not possibly overlook, and actually while she was being told that I intended to go out of my way to call on her mother, who had not called on me, and try to put matters on a better footing. It was the extreme of ungraciousness, and, as I say, it is quite impossible to overlook it. And there it is. These people are living in my very garden, as you might say, for it is only just across the park, and I have the unpleasantness of meeting them about the place, and might at any time meet them in some one else's house, and have them turning up their noses at me. At least the mother would behave properly—I have nothing against her at all, except that she might bring the girl to book and make her apologize to me for her behaviour—but the girl actually does turn up her nose at me when I pass her, and in the most offensive way. At least, she looks me straight in the face, and has not the manners even to pass me without notice."

"Of course that must be highly unpleasant, and you ought not to be subjected to it. You were not to blame in the first place, and besides —— Well, Sarah, I think those people ought to go."

"It has annoyed me more than I can tell you. And it is not only the Redcliffes themselves. Mrs. Redcliffe has apparently gained the esteem of everybody living here. I have not the slightest wish to be unfair to her, and from what has

been told me I will go so far as to say that I have no doubt she deserves it. But it is a little too much when all her friends living in and about the village should visit the annoyance caused to her by Mrs. Prentice on me."

"But surely they have not done that?"

"Unfortunately it is so. Mrs. Redcliffe is apparently such a general favourite that her friends are unable to show their appreciation of her except by—well, the word is rather a curious one to use about myself, but that is what it comes to—by boycotting me."

"Oh, Sarah! but that is a gross piece of impertinence."

"I need not say that I can do very well without them. But I was certainly prepared to treat all the better class of people here with consideration and—and hospitality, and it distresses me to find that—that ——"

Lady Wrotham did not finish her sentence, which might have ended, "That they can do very well without me."

"It seems the height of ingratitude," said Lady Syde. "What other people are there in the place?"

"There is a Captain Turner, a curious man, who lives a sort of hermit's life in a house in the woods behind here and breeds trouts. Mr. Browne, the agent, brought him to see me, at my request. Mrs. Prentice happened to be here at the time and the unfortunate subject of Mrs. Redcliffe came up. He was up in arms at once, and darted out of the house, and, as I heard afterwards, straight up to Mrs. Redcliffe's house, to assure her, I suppose, that he was on her side, whatever line mischievous and quite unimportant people like myself chose to take—although, as a matter of fact, I had actually rebuked Mrs. Prentice in his presence for letting out what I had told her."

"But he lives a hermit's life, Sarah, as you say; he would not worry you much."

"Unfortunately the matter did not rest there. I had ar-

ranged to go up and see his house and his fish-hatching apparatus, and thinking that he was perhaps rather eccentric and not quite accountable for his actions, I wrote him a note a few days ago and said I should like to drive up that afternoon. He actually had the impertinence to write back that he expected Mrs. and Miss Redcliffe to tea that afternoon and that perhaps under the circumstances I should not care to come."

"Do you think it was meant for impertinence? You would not have cared to meet them."

"My dear Henrietta, there was no suggestion of my going on another day; and I learnt through Riddell, who happened to know, that the Redcliffes had not gone to tea there that afternoon and had never been asked to go to tea there. It was as good as telling me—*me*, Henrietta—that he did not wish to see me."

"Oh, but that is quite unallowable, Sarah; he must go."

"I am afraid that he has a long lease of his house. These long leases ought not to be granted. It simply gives a person who is not well disposed to a landowner the power of annoyance, without the possibility of its being stopped. Then there is Mrs. Patrick O'Keefe—I am telling you everything, Henrietta, because it is a relief to me to do so. She is a young widow who settled here a short time ago, after her husband was killed in the war. He was a brother of Lord Ballyshannon. She was away when I first came here, and by the time she returned this unpleasantness had reached its height. She came to see me and I took to her at once. I thought, 'Now at last I have some one I shall always be pleased to see,' and I was quite cheered, for I do like to see my fellow beings occasionally, Henrietta, and I like to have bright and good-looking young people around me. I think she took to me too; I am sure she did, and we put our heads together, my old head and her young head, to see if something could be done to make up to Mrs. Redcliffe for what had happened, as I told

you. It was to her that I heard the Redcliffe girl talking so rudely about me."

"But she did not encourage her?"

"No, I think not. I believe not. I think she would have tried to bring her to a better state of mind. But she told me, that, right or wrong, she was on this girl's side, and that for the present she—well, practically declined the honour of my acquaintance."

"Oh, but, Sarah, that cannot be put up with for a moment. However charming she may be, you cannot have her behaving like that to you. I think she ought to go. Certainly, I think she ought to go."

"She is just the sort of woman, or girl, for she is very young, I should have chosen to be in the place. She has a bright little house in the village. I pass it frequently, but have never been inside it. She has pretty window curtains, and I should think everything very nice. I heard her laughing in the garden as I drove by the other day. Perhaps she is right to be unflinching in support of her friends when they are in trouble, as you might say. I was annoyed with her at the time, and showed it; but I am not annoyed now. I think she regretted what she considered the necessity of breaking with me, and she did not do it in a disagreeable way at all. Still, I see no chance of things coming right at present, and I would rather she went somewhere else where I should not be reminded of the pleasure I might have had by her coming in and out here, as I hoped she would have done."

"It must be very disturbing to you, Sarah. I can quite see that, and I am sorry it has happened. But I should think she would see the advisability of going. What about your agent, whom you mentioned just now? Cannot he do something to bring the people to their senses?"

"I am annoyed with Mr. Browne for many reasons. He also thinks it incumbent on him to champion Mrs. Redcliffe's

part, but there are other things. I need not go into all of them, but he has actually let the Lodge, a sort of dower house to the Abbey, which has been empty some years, to a North-country business man with a large family, who I hear has no sort of pretensions to being a gentleman, and is indeed a Radical and—would you believe it?—a Dissenter; and he has done that since I have been here and without consulting me about it by so much as a word."

"Oh, but, Sarah, that is an outrage. At any rate, there will be no difficulty in getting rid of *him*. I should pack him off to-morrow."

"The galling part of it is, Henrietta—I can say this to you—that George has these matters entirely at his own disposal. I have this house and gardens and so on, but I have no actual status in the management of the property. With a dutiful son I should not be made to feel that I am nobody in such matters as these. My wishes would be deferred to, and in a question that so nearly concerned my own comfort as a tenant for the most important house in the place next to this, I should be empowered to take my own steps. But you know what George is—flighty and irresponsible and troublesome since his boyhood. He was always difficult to guide, and with his extravagance and wildness he has given us endless trouble."

"He is good-hearted," said Lady Syde, "and generous. I think you were too harsh to him when he was a child. At any rate, he is not utterly selfish and grasping—like ——"

"Like Laurence," said Lady Wrotham, who was not pleased with the criticism. "No, thank heaven, he is not like Laurence. And Laurence is what he is owing to your spoiling him when he was a boy and giving him everything he asked for."

Lady Syde did not accept the challenge. "It may be so," she said quietly. "I fear that it is partly so. But George is

not spoilt in that way. It is simply his wildness that I think is the outcome of your severity, and it will tone down as he becomes older. Otherwise he is charming. Surely he will bow to your wishes in these matters."

"He has not done so with regard to these Dales. I own that the money is an important factor at present, and the man is a good tenant as far as money goes. But money is not everything. However, the mischief is done now and I must make the best of it. Only how am I to exercise an influence in the place if half the people insist upon quarrelling with me, and the new people who are brought into it are such as it is impossible for me to know?"

"You *may* find them quite nice people."

"I have very little hope of it. But we will see. You and I will call at the Lodge—let us say on Monday; they ought to be ready to receive us by that time—and see for ourselves. I think you will agree, Henrietta, that I am most unfortunately situated here, although I have every desire to be kind and charitable to those around me. Why, even the farmers and labouring people take sides against me, some of them, on both these questions, although others, I am afraid not the most satisfactory, try to keep in favour with me for what they can get. Some of the labouring men actually omit to touch their hats when I drive past them."

"Oh, but they can be got rid of without the slightest difficulty. I should have not the smallest compunction in dealing with them as they deserve. Yes, Sarah, I do think you are badly treated, and I shall not think so well of George as I have done, if he refuses to set these things right, as far as he can. Where is George, by the bye? Is he at Hurstbury?"

"No, he is here, at present. He came yesterday, though of course I have seen next to nothing of him. He dined at the Ferrabys last night, and is yachting with them to-day."

"The Ferrabys! Those are Laurence's friends. Do they live near here?"

"They rent this shooting and Forest Lodge, the house you passed half-way between here and the station. They have brought a large party down for Whitsuntide, and I believe Laurence is one of the party. I hope he will not show his face here. I have no wish to see him, now or ever. I consider his influence over George is disastrous, and all the terrible waste of money that has been going on ever since George's boyhood I put down to him."

"You cannot say anything harsh about Laurence that I do not endorse," said Lady Syde. "Money disappears in an incredible way in his hands, and it was the same with his dear father before him. Franklin was a kind husband. I never had a harsh word from him and his manners were perfect, but—well you know my history, Sarah. I was a rich woman, you might say a very rich woman when I married, and I am now poor. I have all I want, of course, but I am poor."

"I hope you are not allowing Laurence to sponge on you any farther. He must be responsible for a great deal of the reduction in your income."

"He has his allowance. Most young men—not that he is very young now, but he behaves as if he were—would consider a thousand a year a very handsome allowance. It seems to go no way with him and he is always asking for money. I have been obliged to refuse definitely to do any more for him, or I should be reduced to beggary. And he is not in the least grateful for what I have done. He never comes near me now I am of no further use to him in that way."

"I suppose you will leave him your money?"

Lady Syde did not show surprise at this very plain question, which was of a kind these two ladies were accustomed to put to one another. "I shall leave him twenty thousand

pounds," she said, "and not a penny more. I have told him that, and I dare say he has already anticipated it. The rest I shall leave to Richard Baldock, my nephew. I did him a great injustice when he was a boy, owing, I know now, to Laurence's duplicity; but he has made a career for himself, and I am happy to think he has not suffered from my injustice to him."

"It was he who married Harry Ventrey's heiress, was it not?"

"Yes. But she was not much of an heiress. She had Beechhurst Hall, a beautiful place in the forest, but they would not have been able to live there if it had not been for Richard's own success in his business. They are a charming couple, and when I go to stay with them I see what home life, which I have never had myself, can be. There is no struggling for money or for place. They are contented with their beautiful home, and their children and their work, and themselves. It is refreshing. A happy home life, after all, is the best thing the world has to offer."

"It is a very different kind of life, at any rate, to that led by such people as the Ferrabys. I have moved all my life in what I suppose would be acknowledged to be the best society, but really the manners and customs of the present day are to me positively shocking. Here are these people the Ferrabys, they are rich, therefore they are all-important. There are great people, very great people, whom I need not further particularize, who would certainly prefer to accept hospitality from people like the Ferrabys, than from—me. They lead society now, when a generation ago they would only have been on the outskirts of it. Received, yes, perhaps so, for the Ferrabys are gentle-people, though all of their set are certainly not; but never presuming to take a leading part. And what a change! Look at the people the Ferrabys have in their house now. Husbands without their wives and wives without their hus-

bands. Would that have been done a generation ago? Certainly not, in the matter-of-course way in which it is done now. There is that Mrs. Lancing there. A disreputable woman I call her. She divorced her husband, but from all I hear he might just as well have divorced her, and her next husband will probably do so. In my younger days we should have turned our backs on such a woman. Now we have to meet her everywhere, unless we keep quietly to ourselves and do not go about amongst the people to whom we belong. *I* have always taken a stand and kept my house clear of all doubtful people, and what has been my reward? The people whom I had a right to expect to come to me left off coming, because I could not amuse them. Amuse them! What is all this modern folly about amusement? In my day we thought nothing of it. We did our duty as great people, entertained each other with dignity and sometimes with splendour, and that was enough. Henrietta, when I see the English aristocracy running wild after amusement as they are doing to-day, I tremble for my order."

"Well, I don't know that it does the English aristocracy any harm to be woken up by amusing people, who don't originally belong to it," said Lady Syde. "But I do know that after a time a life of amusement becomes very wearing. You and I are beyond the age at which we are likely to care about it, and we want to live quietly and be left alone. But what are the Ferrabys doing down here? They have a very fine house in London. I thought they had a big country place somewhere."

"Of course you would suppose so. But nowadays, it seems quite enough to have a big house in London. Mr. Ferraby has the shooting here. I can't say I like that. He has the right to shoot all round this very house if he wants to. But I say nothing about that. It can't be helped at present. And he has Forest Lodge, quite a small house, with it. It is

a good thing it is no bigger. As it is it is filled from time to time with noisy *smart* people, as they call themselves, whom I don't want about the place. I feel that it takes away from my dignity—I can say this to you, Henrietta. Country people have no discrimination; they see me living a quiet life here, and they see all sorts of well-known people going to and fro at the Forest Lodge, and they draw absurd comparisons in their minds."

"Well," said Lady Syde, "I think the Ferrabys ought to have notice given them, and the house should be let to somebody you would like to have on the place. I do think that strongly. This is your house now, and you ought to have everything done for your comfort that it is possible to do."

"I am glad you sympathize with me, Henrietta. I feel that things are not going well, and it has been a great relief to talk them over with you. I shall have a serious conversation with George about all the matters I have mentioned to you, and I hope he will take some steps. Now I think we had better get ready for our drive."

They drove out presently up the hill and across the open heath lands. Lady Syde broke out into open protestations of delight as they passed the White House. "That is just such a place as I should like to settle down in," she said, "and get rid of all the bothers and responsibilities of a big house."

"Well, if Mrs. Redcliffe goes," said Lady Wrotham, "as I hope she will be induced to do, it will be vacant; and I need not say, Henrietta, if you would really care to live in such a small place, what pleasure it would give me to have you there."

CHAPTER XXX

VISITS

Turner bicycled down to the village and up to the Lodge on Monday afternoon to visit his new neighbours. He leaned his bicycle up against the porch, and stooped down to take off his trouser clips. The front door was wide open, and Mr. Dale, in his shirt sleeves, was superintending the placing of a pair of cows' horns over each of the doorways. This was the climax of the decoration of the hall, which was now complete. He came to the door to flick off the ash from his cigar, and saw Turner. "Now, my man," he said, with decision, but with perfect good humour, "you just get on your bicycle and ride off again, unless you'd like a glass of beer, which you're welcome to, before you go. You're the fifth we've had to-day. We're going to deal with the shops in Exton as long as they satisfy us, and we shan't require anything from outside."

No form of welcome could have given Turner greater pleasure. His eyes glistened as he looked at Mr. Dale, standing solidly on the step in front of him.

"They're capital shops in Exton," he said. "I hope they'll satisfy you."

"Thank you; I hope they will. I suppose you've come from Riverton. I don't mind your coming, you know. I like enterprise in business. I've had to do that sort of thing myself, or I shouldn't be where I am now. But at present I don't want you; when I do I'll let you know."

"Thank you," said Turner, "but I don't come from Riverton."

"Well, I don't care where you come from, as long as you get back there as quickly as possible."

"Very well. You won't mind my first leaving a card on Mrs. Dale, will you? Out of politeness, you know."

"Eh, what!" exclaimed Mr. Dale, now bringing his eyes, which had been fixed affably on the trees below his house, to bear upon Turner, and gaining from his inspection a dawning discomfort. "Card for Mrs. Dale?"

"Yes; here it is. Captain Thomas Turner, The Fisheries, Exton. If you wouldn't mind just taking it, I can get back there as soon as possible."

Mr. Dale instinctively took the card that was held out to him, and as he did so enlightenment burst upon him. It brought no confusion with it, as might have been expected, but a huge roar of laughter. "Well, that's the best thing I've ever heard of," he said when he was able to speak. "To think of me taking you for a touting tradesman!" He roared again as he led the way across the hall. "'Pon my word, that's the best joke," he said. "I must tell mother that. Hi! mother! Come in here, Mr.—er, Captain—er. You shall tell her yourself. And you to take it like that, too! I'll tell you what, Mr.—er—Captain Turner, you and me ought to get on together. That's the sort of thing I like. Well, you'll have a joke against me all your life. Hi! mother!"

Mrs. Dale arrived, and the joke was explained to her. She did not receive it with the same ecstasy as her husband, but looked at him reproachfully. "Oh, father!" she said. "I'm sure I don't know what Captain Turner will think of us, and how you could make the mistake passes my comprehension. And showing him in here, too, where everything is in such a muddle!"

"Lor', he don't mind that," said Mr. Dale. "Do you, Mr.—er—Captain? And the way he took it! Never so

much as a smile. 'Pon my word, it was the very best thing." He roared again, but came round suddenly. "What'll you take, Captain? A whisky and soda? Have a cigar. Here you are; you won't find anything wrong with that. What'll you take to drink, now?"

"You offered me a glass of beer just now," said Turner; "I think I'll take that."

This set Mr. Dale off again. He slapped his fat thighs with his fat hands in an ecstasy of enjoyment, and expressed the utmost gratification at finding a man so after his own heart living in the place.

Turner took his enthusiasm quietly. They were all like that, he said, in Exton. His friend Browne was like that. Mrs. Prentice, the Vicar's wife, was like it. If Mr. Dale had met her at the door and taken her for a servant come after a place, there was nobody who would have enjoyed it more. Even Lady Wrotham was like it. She might seem a little stiff at first sight, but if you told her exactly what you thought about things she took to you at once.

"I think you must be wrong about Mrs. Prentice, Captain Turner," said Mrs. Dale. "She did come in to see us on Saturday, and we did not like her."

"Like her!" said Mr. Dale. "No, we did *not* like her. We make no pretence, but we're not accustomed to be patronized by ministers' wives, and told when we ought to go to church, and when we oughtn't to go to church. And we don't intend to take our religion from her, nor our politics neither. And so I told her pretty plain, and she didn't like that. So there won't be much love lost between us and her."

"Lady Wrotham is quite different," said Turner. "She's a strong Tory and Churchwoman herself, but you've only got to tell her you're not, and she'll take to you wonderfully."

"Come now, I like that," said Mrs. Dale heartily. "I'm

very glad to hear it of her ladyship. She and us won't be seeing much of each other, I dare say. She's in one walk of life and we're in another, and no intentions to presume or to get out of it. But if I do ever have the chance of a little talk with her ladyship I'll make it quite plain that I don't agree with her Church nor her politics, but that's no reason I shouldn't go my way and she go hers, and neither think the worse of the other."

"You'll find that the best way," said Turner. "I think I must be going now."

Mr. Dale would have liked to sit and talk to him for an hour, but Turner prepared decidedly to take his leave. Mrs. Dale went up-stairs, and Mr. Dale accompanied him to the front door. As they stood there a carriage and pair, with coachman and footman on the box, came in view round the bend of the steep drive. "Lor', what's this?" exclaimed Mr. Dale.

"It's Lady Wrotham coming to see you," said Turner, bending down to fasten his clips, and possibly to hide his face.

"Well, now, I take that very kind," said Mr. Dale, and rushed back into the hall to get his coat, appearing again at the porch in the act of putting it on as the carriage came to a stop. Lady Syde was the nearer to him, and he shook hands with her warmly. "How do you do, Lady Wrotham?" he said heartily. "I take this as a great compliment, and so will mother. Come in now, do, and bring your friend. If you'll honour us by drinking a cup of tea ——"

Lady Wrotham managed to make herself heard. "*I* am Lady Wrotham," she said, with a cloud of annoyance on her Olympian brow. "I have come to see Mrs. Dale. This is Lady Syde."

Mr. Dale stared for a moment, and then slapped his thigh. "Well, if I haven't put my foot in it and made a mistake

again!" he cried. "Whatever mother'll say to me, I don't know. It was only just now, Mrs.—er—Lady—er—that I took the Captain here for a tradesman come for orders, and wanted to send him about his business." He had time to indicate Turner before losing himself again in a paroxysm of hearty laughter.

Turner took off his cap. "It was only natural," he said. "I told you my father was a shop-keeper, Lady Wrotham."

"Very amusing, no doubt," said Lady Wrotham. "Mr. Dale, will you kindly tell Mrs. Dale that Lady Wrotham has called, or shall my servant ring the bell?"

Mr. Dale came to himself. "I'm forgetting my manners, my lady," he said. "If you'll kindly step in, I'll tell the wife. I expect she'll want a few minutes to smarten herself up. Will you just step in and take a glass of port wine now?—you and your friend—I didn't catch her name."

"No, thank you," said Lady Wrotham shortly, becoming more and more angry. "Will you let Mrs. Dale know I am here?"

"Yes; but do take something—a glass of port, or sherry, or a cup of tea—anything you like to name. This is Liberty Hall. Step in now and make yourself at home, and I'll go and tell mother."

Lady Wrotham lost patience. "Put this card on the table," she said to the footman, "and drive on. I cannot wait any longer."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," said Mr. Dale. "I didn't know you were in such a hurry. I'll go and fetch the wife at once," and he disappeared into the house.

"Put the card on the table," repeated Lady Wrotham, "and drive on." Her face was a study in dark displeasure as she sat upright in her carriage while her behest was obeyed. Turner had taken himself off on his bicycle, chuckling, but Peter and Gladys were standing in the drive devouring her and

her equipage with astonished eyes, Mary's garden hat could be seen over a low bush behind them, Ada's face was only half concealed by a window curtain, and, as they drove away, Lotty looked up from a rose-bush in the open garden, and Tom strolled innocently past them with his briar pipe in his mouth.

"Did you ever hear of such a reception?" said Lady Wrotham as the carriage rolled down the hill. "And those are the sort of people I am supposed to live on equal terms with, Henrietta. The man is no better than a savage."

"It is my belief," said Lady Syde, "that he was drunk. You cannot put up with them, Sarah; they must go."

The two ladies soothed their rasped feelings with a long drive, and returned to the Abbey for tea. They had no sooner taken their seats for another quiet chat, one of a continuous series with which they entertained each other whenever they were in company, when Mrs. Ferraby was announced.

Mrs. Ferraby, beautifully dressed, and throwing the two elder ladies quite into the shade by her appearance, came in, graceful and smiling.

"My party has gone off on the yacht again," she said, "but I thought I would stay behind and come and see you, Lady Wrotham. Oh, Lady Syde, how do you do? I heard you were here. Laurence is an old friend of ours, and I have heard so much of you."

"A good deal that you would not care to repeat, I dare say," responded Lady Syde, and Lady Wrotham added —

"Major Syde is no great favourite of mine, as I dare say you know, Mrs. Ferraby. We will find some other topic of conversation. I am glad to see you. I hope you are enjoying your holiday in the country."

"Very much, thank you," replied Mrs. Ferraby, rustling her silks. "It has been such a rush in London that we are glad to get away for a few days' rest."

"I suppose Mr. Ferraby works so hard at his business," said Lady Wrotham, "that he welcomes these holidays, although to the rest of us they are rather tiresome."

Mrs. Ferraby looked at her and then laughed. "Yes," she said, "we generally spend the Bank Holiday on Hampstead Heath, but this time business has been so good that we thought we might manage a picnic down here."

Lady Wrotham looked at her with displeasure, but Lady Syde suddenly laughed and said, "Very good; you deserved that, Sarah," which did not improve Lady Wrotham's temper.

"I hope you like Exton," said Mrs. Ferraby. "We are so fond of the place that we would put up with any inconvenience to be here. And, of course, the Forest Lodge is very inconvenient."

"I am sure we shall be very pleased to relieve you of it," said Lady Wrotham. "There would be no difficulty in letting it again to people who were prepared to live there quietly, and see a few of their friends there quietly, from time to time."

"I am afraid you won't get rid of us so easily," said Mrs. Ferraby, still smiling. "We would rather picnic here than live comfortably in a larger house. I wonder if you and Lady Syde would care to dine with us one night. We shall be here till Thursday or Friday, and we have some amusing people staying with us."

"Thank you," replied Lady Wrotham. "I do not dine out in the country now. And, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Ferraby, I am not at all anxious to meet your amusing people, nor, I expect, would they be very anxious to meet me. I am afraid I should hardly add to their amusement."

"Oh, but I am sure you would, Lady Wrotham," said Mrs. Ferraby brightly. "However, I won't press you against your will. I only thought that you might be a little dull living here in this big house alone, and we should like to do something while we are down here to cheer you up a little."

"You would no doubt find it dull, living here alone, Mrs. Ferraby," said Lady Wrotham. "But I am thankful to say that I have resources, and that I am not dependent upon a succession of noisy visitors to entertain me."

"That sounds a trifle rude," said Lady Syde; "but I am sure you do not mean to be so, Sarah."

"Certainly I do not wish to be rude," said Lady Wrotham. "But I am accustomed to say what I think. I never mixed myself up with the sort of life that Mrs. Ferraby's friends live, either in London or in the country, and in the country especially I dislike it. I think it is thoroughly unsettling. I am quite content to live quietly amongst the people around me, whether they are what are called smart people or not."

Mrs. Ferraby had listened to this speech with attention. "But I thought you did not get on well with the people around you here, Lady Wrotham," she said. "I understood that you were not pleased with them and saw nothing of anybody."

Lady Wrotham, thus addressed, and the annoyance to which she had been subjected earlier in the afternoon having not yet entirely worn off, lost what little desire she may have had to conceal her dislike for the kind of existence represented by Mrs. Ferraby. "It is quite true," she said. "The people here are the most impossible that I could find to live quietly amongst. But, tiresome and quarrelsome as they are, I would rather take my chance of bringing them to a better state of mind than be dependent for society on a set of fast London people, most of whom are no better than they should be. Nothing could be more disturbing than to introduce that sort of life into a place like this. It sets a thoroughly bad example, and it gives people who don't know any better the impression that it is representative of the upper classes. It is a very different kind of life to the one I wish to set before them."

"Well," said Mrs. Ferraby, rising, and still smiling sweetly, "I should have thought it was a better example than to quarrel with all your neighbours and live in solitary grandeur. My husband and I have always been very good friends with the people here, except perhaps with Mrs. Prentice, whom neither of us like. It has been quite delightful to come here and see something of such nice people. We come now and find them all set by the ears. However, we shall not trouble you again, Lady Wrotham. I can *quite* understand now why Exton is no longer the quiet, friendly little place it was a few months ago." And with this parting shot she went away, without further leave-taking, leaving Lady Wrotham and Lady Syde alone once more.

Lady Wrotham made a strong effort to master her wrath. "Another annoyance," she said. "My life is made up of them now. The woman is innately vulgar. All these fast people are so at heart."

"Well, Sarah," said Lady Syde, "I must say that you were not very conciliatory. You can hardly expect a woman in Mrs. Ferraby's position to sit down quietly under the sort of attack you made upon her."

"Her position!" echoed Lady Wrotham. "What is her position? She shall listen to whatever I choose to say to her."

If there was one thing that Mrs. Ferraby quite made up her mind about as she motored back to the Forest Lodge, it was that under no circumstances would she ever again give Lady Wrotham an opportunity of speaking to her in the way she had done. She told her husband of what had passed between them when he returned with his guests from their yachting excursion. "I think I gave her as good as she gave me," she said. "But I can't help feeling rather sorry for the poor old thing, Hugh. She is awfully rude, but she is rather pathetic too, all alone there. Still, of course, one can't have anything more to do with her. I'll never go near her again."

"No necessity to," said Mr. Ferraby. "She must be an old terror. Lots of nice people in the world, without bothering about the disagreeable ones. I don't wonder that George Wrotham isn't very respectful when he talks about her. I say, old girl, he and Syde are making the running pretty hot with the little O'Keefe. Think there's anything in it?"

"I don't know what to think," said Mrs. Ferraby. "I don't see how Laurence can possibly marry her, but he seems keener than I have ever seen him before. And as for George, well, you expect it of him; but I shouldn't wonder if the way he and Laurence are fighting over her doesn't end in making him really in earnest."

"There's no doubt about the fighting. Syde is a bigger fool than I take him for, if he's going to quarrel with Wrotham. Which does she like best? *I* can't make out."

"If she likes either of them, I believe it is Laurence."

"Still, he wouldn't have much chance against Wrotham if it really came to business."

This was the Ferraby point of view. But Mrs. Ferraby said, "She is rather different from ordinary people. I think she would take the one she liked best; but I am not at all sure she cares for either of them. She's a dear thing. I am glad we are able to give her a good time. It must be pretty dull for her here."

"Yes; why don't you ask her to come up to town with us, and take her about a bit?"

"She wouldn't come when I asked her last year."

"I think she would now. It's time she married again. She's too good to be buried alive down here. Well, I know which of those two would make her the best husband, if she wants another. I say, we must go and dress. It's nearly nine o'clock."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE PICNIC BREAKS UP

Motoring and yachting by day, Bridge-playing half the night and sleeping the rest, and talking and laughing all the time, except when their eyes were actually closed, the genial company gathered together for the picnic at the Forest Lodge got through the days very comfortably, and managed to escape almost entirely the clutches of the Giant Boredom, whom it was their constant endeavour to keep at bay until such time as they should be forced to climb the last great beanstalk, at the top of which they pictured him as reigning for evermore. Lord Wrotham and Mrs. O'Keefe, having been elected honorary members of the picnic, were with them every day, and dined with them on most evenings, but Sir Francis Redcliffe was a continual deserter. He liked sailing, he said, better than any other amusement they had to offer him; he hated sitting still and doing nothing with his hands. And, as nobody else during the days of that particular picnic happened to want to sail, he had the entire use of Mr. Ferraby's boat at Harben, and frequently persuaded his cousins at the White House, as well as Mr. Browne and Captain Turner, to use it with him. Thus there were two distinct parties enjoying their Whitsuntide holidays at Exton, and the quieter of the two probably enjoyed them as much as the noisier.

The Redcliffes had dined at the Forest Lodge on the second evening of the picnic, but Mrs. Redcliffe, who liked the Ferrabys, but liked them better in her own house than in theirs, had refused further invitations; Mrs. Ferraby had accompanied Francis Redcliffe to the White House on Sunday afternoon while her husband and the rest of the

guests were scouring the roads of the country in search of Sabbath calm, but otherwise the two parties had not fused. Neither had the Redcliffes seen Norah O'Keefe since they had dined together at the Forest Lodge on Saturday.

Now the motor-cars had flitted away from the Forest Lodge, each with its load of revivified picnickers. The yacht had steamed back to Greathampton, prepared to put herself at the disposal of any one who was ready to pay two or three hundred pounds a week for the privilege of amusing themselves with her, and the sailing boat had taken up her moorings in the Wemble River, there to remain until the Ferrabys should take it into their heads to order her out again. And Exton Manor had settled down again to the discussion of its internal politics.

But the Whitsuntide invasion had brought one or two new factors into play, and the situation was not in all respects the same as it had been before. The most disturbing of these, perhaps, was a slight coolness that sprang up between Hilda Redcliffe and Norah O'Keefe. Norah came up to the White House on the day that the Forest Lodge was left to its solitude and Exton to its everyday ways. Her air was no less friendly than usual; perhaps it was rather more obviously friendly, as if she wished to show that she was entirely unchanged. "You must have thought that I had quite forsaken you," she said. "But I seem to have been caught up into such a whirl of gaiety and amusement, that I have had no time to see even my best friends. But you have been gay too, haven't you? I should have liked to come sailing with you, but the Ferrabys wouldn't let me off for a single day, and, to tell you the truth, Sir Francis never asked me."

"I expect you enjoyed yourself much more as it was," said Hilda. "But I thought you were going to town with Mrs. Ferraby."

"They asked me to go back with them," said Norah

"But I don't want to go just yet. I want to have a quiet little time with you first after all this dashing about. We are very happy together here, and too much excitement isn't good for quiet people."

"*We* haven't been very happy here lately," said Hilda; "and we are going away ourselves in a week. We are going to stay with my cousin, and we shall be very glad to get away from Exton for a bit."

From this short conversation the coolness sprang. Each of them felt herself aggrieved. Norah had been greatly pressed by Mrs. Ferraby, and also by most of her guests, to return to London with them, and there continue the various intimacies she had formed during the course of the picnic, and would have done so but that she thought her older friends, whom it was rather on her conscience that she had neglected lately, might want her. Now she felt that her good intentions had been thrown in her face, and it seemed to her that she had been told that they could do very well without her. She had some reason in being aggrieved.

Hilda would have told herself, and did tell herself, that she had no reason to be aggrieved, and was not aggrieved. The last thing she would have been willing to acknowledge was that it caused her the slightest disappointment that Lord Wrotham, who, until Norah's superior charms had attracted him, had certainly shown himself attracted by her, had taken no steps to pursue his pleasantly-begun intimacy with her and her mother. She had seen him only twice since he had come up to the White House directly after his arrival in Exton and intimated his intention of coming up again pretty frequently during his visit. The first time was at dinner at the Forest Lodge, when his open, friendly manner to herself and her mother had not deteriorated in quality, but had in quantity, for he had devoted himself to Norah throughout the evening and had found no time to do more than say a few words to Hilda.

On Sunday morning he had been in church, sitting alone in the pew which his mother had forsaken for another in Standon church, and frequently looking behind him as if in search of somebody. He had spoken to her and her mother in the churchyard after the service, amiably cracking a joke, and had then darted away. Norah O'Keefe had not put in an appearance, and he had presumably gone to find out the reason.

Hilda told herself that nothing more than this could have been expected of him, and that she certainly neither expected nor wanted more of him. Also it was very natural that he should prefer the society of Norah O'Keefe, who was far more beautiful and attractive than she was, or professed to be, to hers. Also, that he was welcome to take pleasure in Norah's society as far as she was concerned, that being exactly what she would have expected and would have wished. There was nothing at all in Lord Wrotham's behaviour that offended her in the least degree; in fact, she had not cared about his rather too pressing attentions, and preferred things as they were. But, at the same time, she could not help feeling a little disappointed in the behaviour of her friend. It was not quite nice that Norah, who had only been widowed a short time, and had often expressed in their more confidential talks together her intention of remaining a widow all her life, should wish, as apparently she did wish, to have all the men around her at her feet. She would say herself, no doubt, that she could not help it; but there was the fact that she did not discourage them. They had often laughed together over the obvious infatuation of Captain Turner and Mr. Browne, who had both thrown themselves at her immediately upon her arrival in Exton, and had behaved in the most absurd way ever since, although they had been intimate at the White House years before. She was quite welcome to the attentions of two middle-aged bachelors, but most people would have found them rather

tiresome and put an end to them. She was also quite welcome to the devotion of Fred Prentice, who had behaved very badly, and whom she herself never thought of without indignation, and hoped never to see again. But would a really nice woman have acted so as to call forth that devotion, under the peculiar circumstances of the case? Hilda was obliged to think she would not. And now here was Lord Wrotham, and if Hilda had eyes in her head, yet another admirer, both apparently encouraged to pay her as much attention as they cared to. No, it was not nice, it was not what she would have expected of Norah. As far as she was concerned, it made no difference at all. She had most decidedly never been in love, or near to being in love, either with Fred Prentice or Lord Wrotham, but she was inclined to think that if she had been it would have made no difference; they would have been lured away just the same. It was really rather a wonder that Norah had not exercised her fascination on Francis—as she now called her cousin. He was, of course, a man of much stronger character than either Fred Prentice or Lord Wrotham; there was no comparison between them. She herself would not have objected in the least if she had done so; not for herself, that is, because she, at any rate, was not anxious to be surrounded by men; she did not care about that sort of thing; but he was her cousin, and now a very good friend both to her mother and herself, and really, one might have supposed that that was enough reason, to judge by what had happened before.

Thus Hilda, in the general soreness of her heart, brought about by various causes, and doing a good deal less than justice to the friend whom she had hitherto valued next after her mother. For the present the friendship was clouded, and little pleasure was to be got out of it, and it was with a feeling of relief on both sides that Norah O'Keefe went up to London a few days later, and Hilda and her mother to pay a

long visit to Riverslea, the old home of their family, which neither of them had ever expected to see.

Lady Syde also departed from the Abbey about this time, and Browne and Turner set out together on a little Continental tour, Browne feeling the necessity of relieving his mind for a time of the cares that oppressed it in connection with the management of Exton Manor, if he was to continue to administer its affairs with anything of his former capability, and Turner consenting to go with him to look after him. So that of all the inhabitants of Exton with whom we have had to do, there were now only left Lady Wrotham, living in solitary state at the Abbey, and Mr. and Mrs. Prentice at the vicarage. The Dales, it is true, were at the Lodge, and at this time were probably the only people who were thoroughly contented with their lot, for it had never occurred either to Mr. or Mrs. Dale that their place in life would entitle them, when they settled down at Exton, to consider themselves on any sort of equality with Lady Wrotham, and they were consequently not disturbed when the great lady, the purport of whose first visit they had not quite understood, intimated by her manner when either of them passed her carriage that further intimacy with them was not in her mind. So the Dales lived their life apart, and what with their garden and their chickens, and their boat and their pony carriage, and a succession of visitors from Manchester and elsewhere, found that life came quite up to their expectations.

It would have been well for Lady Wrotham in her beautiful house and gardens, surrounded by everything that might have made the most exigent of great ladies happy, if she had been able to wake up in the morning with a tithe of the pleasurable anticipations with which any member of the despised Dale family hailed a fresh summer day. Encouraged by Lady Syde, she had made an attempt to set her life on

a basis more satisfactory to herself, but the attempt had ended in failure, and left her with an added sense of injury. It was perhaps the bitterest feature of the failure she had so far met with in her ruling of what she looked upon as her kingdom, that the actual reigning monarch was her son, and that, although he could easily have put things straight for her by leaving her to act as she thought fit, and officially endorsing her actions, he had refused to do so; and here she was, a dowager queen with a throne but no sceptre, and even the glory of her throne of no avail, since the eyes of her subjects seemed to be blind to it. Much could be written of the woes of the dowager and the passing of power—instruments tuned for the tragic muse.

The one attempt to break the bonds may be recorded.

"You must have a serious talk with George," said Lady Syde, after the subject had been threshed out between the two ladies for the twentieth time.

Lady Wrotham intimated her willingness, but the difficulty at that time was to get hold of George. He was staying with his mother, but for all she saw of him he might have been staying anywhere. "He has not dined here once since he came," she said. "He flies out of the house the moment he has breakfasted, and comes back long after I am in bed. I hear him, for I do not sleep well. I cannot very well say that I do not want to have him here, but, really, if the Ferrabys are such an attraction to him, he might just as well have joined their party altogether. This house, at any rate, is not his under the arrangement, and I have no mind to have him using it merely as an hotel, and not paying his mother the very smallest attention."

"Young men will behave in that way," said Lady Syde. "I am too used to it myself to care very much. But you must tell him that you wish to speak to him. If breakfast is the only meal he takes here I should breakfast with him

and insist upon a conversation before he leaves the house."

"His breakfast takes him about five minutes. He would say he must be going, and rush out of the house."

"Then write him a note and say you must speak to him before he goes. I cannot think that he will refuse to do so."

The note was written and the interview took place in the half-hour before Lord Wrotham drove off to join the Ferrabys and their party at the station. Lady Syde was present by request. Lady Wrotham in her anxiety to get to the point, omitted all reference to his undutiful behaviour, and was at first even a little flurried, as he walked about the room with his hands in his pockets and looked from time to time at his watch.

"My dear mother," he said, in answer to her statement that affairs were not progressing as she had hoped at Exton and that changes must be made, "if you insist upon quarrelling with everybody in the place, you can't expect to be comfortable anywhere. I don't know what changes you want made. The only change I can suggest is that you should recognize that you are living in the twentieth century."

"I am quite at a loss to know what you can mean by that piece of advice, George," she said.

"Well, I suppose a thousand years ago you might have lived in a house like this and expected everybody all round you to knuckle under and do exactly what you told them. You certainly can't expect it now. You let your houses to people, and you leave 'em to lead their own lives in their own way. If you didn't, you wouldn't let your houses. It's quite simple. Nobody's going to be bossed now by people like us, and I don't blame 'em."

"Your remarks are quite beside the point, George, as well as being rather offensive," said Lady Wrotham.

"Mr. Moggeridge used to say that it was the age of democracy," said Lady Syde. "But there are limits."

"I think it's too bad, mother, the way you've behaved about Mrs. Redcliffe," continued Wrotham. "There's a woman you might have made a real pal of. One of the best. And what's the poor lady done? Nothing, but what any of us mightn't do to-morrow."

"*I*, for one, should never have thought of doing it, George," said Lady Syde. "But that is not the point. The Redcliffes refuse to behave with ordinary courtesy to your mother, and it is very awkward their being here at all. They ought to go. There would be no difficulty in letting the house. Under certain circumstances I might even take it myself."

"If they are driven out of the place you shall have the first offer, Aunt Henrietta," said Wrotham. "But it's no use asking me to drive them out, because I'm not going to do it. Then there are the Ferrabys, mother. You told Mrs. Ferraby the other day that they weren't wanted here. Really, you know, that's a bit thick to anybody, and a nice woman like that, too, of all people! If they'd taken offence—only, of course, they were sensible and only laughed at it—I might have had the shooting thrown on my hands. You oughtn't to do it, you know."

"I didn't ask you to speak to me in order that I might listen to your strictures on my conduct, George," said Lady Wrotham. "I am aware that the rent of the shooting is a consideration, and I suppose I must put up with the Ferrabys, and be thankful that they are not always here and that when they are I need see nothing of them and their noisy friends. What I wanted to speak to you about particularly was the Vicar."

"Well, what's wrong with the Vicar? I shook hands with him going into church the other day and I thought he seemed a

very nice fellow. Everybody else seems to think so too. Of course, he's a bit higher than you like—I know that—but you've got to take these parsons as they come. You can't turn 'em out. Nobody can turn 'em out. I don't like that sanctimonious old Dr. Blimey that you got father to put in at Hurstbury, but I put up with him. You must make up your mind to put up with Prentice."

"The cases are entirely different. Dr. Blimey knows what true religion is, and ——"

"He knows what good port is. But it's waste of time talking about Prentice, because, if I wanted to, I couldn't shift him."

"I have an idea," said Lady Syde. "My brother-in-law who is a clergyman exchanged livings. That can be done. Why not get Mr. Prentice and Dr.—whatever his name is, to exchange livings?"

"And have Mrs. Prentice down at Hurstbury. No, thank you, Aunt Henrietta. I'm not taking any. Now, there's a disagreeable woman, if you like! I don't wonder at your quarrelling with her, mother. Well, I must be off. Good-bye, mother; good-bye, Aunt Henrietta. See you again pretty soon, I hope."

"Stop," cried Lady Wrotham. "George, I have not said half I want to say. There is Mr. Browne, and Captain Turner, and those vulgar people at the Lodge. I really cannot consent ——"

"Can't stay now, mother. Make it up with 'em all, and you'll be twice as comfortable. Good-bye." And he was gone.

Lady Wrotham looked at Lady Syde. "I might as well have saved my breath," she said angrily.

CHAPTER XXXII

TROUBLES AT THE VICARAGE

Mrs. Prentice, after her brief experiment in unfamiliar theology, had returned with increased zest to her lifelong opinions, but her return had not brought peace to the vicarage, nor to herself. When she had eased herself of the immediate effects of her rupture with Lady Wrotham by an almost hysterical outburst of tears, which had more of passion and resentment in them than of grief, she went in to her husband with the air of a proud, but much-injured, woman, and said, "William, I have done with my Lady Wrotham. I will never darken her doors again, and I wish never to have her name mentioned. I can now see plainly that I might have spared myself all the pains I have taken to influence her. She is infatuated with her own importance. Henceforth she may go her way and I will go mine; but for one thing you may rely upon me—I will use every effort in my power to oppose her in her upsetting of everything we hold sacred. I will spare myself no trouble. By night and by day I will ——"

"Oh, please stop," broke in the Vicar impatiently. "What has happened?"

"I was going to tell you what has happened. Lady Wrotham has had the face to take me to task—in the most offensive way, and with Mrs. O'Keefe sitting there and listening to it all, and very pleased to be listening to it too—she has wormed herself into her confidence, and after behaving as she has done to me, must needs in the most underhand way make mischief behind my back. But fortunately I arrived unex-

pectedly. I have always been suspicious of Mrs. O'Keefe. She ——"

"Perhaps you will leave Mrs. O'Keefe alone for the time, and tell me, if you want to tell me, what it was that Lady Wrotham took you to task about."

"I do not want to tell you. It was a mere nothing, but it was the last straw. I am not to be domineered over by Lady Wrotham, or Lady anybody else. I hope I know my position better. After all I have done to keep in with Lady Wrotham for the good of the place and all of us in it —— She is very unpopular; nobody likes her, and I promise her that they shall like her still less for the future—after all I have given up ——"

"You have no doubt given up a great deal; most of your self-respect, I should think, amongst other things, and all your convictions, and your duty to me, if that counts for anything."

Mrs. Prentice turned her attack. "Do you think it is becoming in you, William," she asked, "to receive me in this way, when I come expressly to tell you that we are now again at one in all these questions, that I will use every nerve and muscle I possess to fight with you, that ——"

"Oh, Agatha, what transparent nonsense it all is!" cried her husband, interrupting her. He rose from his seat and began to pace the floor. "Do you take me for a fool, that I can't see through it? You have given up everything, as you very rightly say, to keep in with Lady Wrotham; everything that as a self-respecting woman you ought not to have given up. Now you have found that your trouble is wasted, and that even you cannot pay the price that she wants for her favour, you turn completely round, and propose to do what you can to make her life a burden to her, just as you have made mine a burden to me. There is no more honesty or Christianity now than there was before. You are simply

following the dictates of malice and spite. I have no wish to receive you back as an ally. I won't do it. Your spirit is doing more harm to my work than all Lady Wrotham's foolish opposition."

"Well, that is a pleasant thing to hear!" exclaimed Mrs. Prentice, deeply offended.

"Look here!" He stopped at his writing-table and took up a letter. "I have just received this from Mrs. Ripton. 'Mrs. Prentice told me yesterday that Lady Wrotham was angry with me for sending the children to church on Sundays, and that I had better not do it, or my share of the servants' laundry work would be taken away from me. I hopes, sir, you will understand that I don't hold with her ladyship, but can't afford to quarrel with her!'" He threw the letter on the table again. "It is all very petty and absurd, of course. But when I receive a reminder of that sort of the way you have been behaving, and then you come in immediately full of righteous wrath against the person whose errands you have been running ——"

"Ah, that is over," interrupted Mrs. Prentice, who had not been able to prevent the rising of a hot flush on her face as the contents of Mrs. Ripton's missive were being divulged to her. "Of course, I was mistaken. I see it now. With the best of intentions, I was mistaken."

"Mistaken in what?"

"In allowing myself to be persuaded that Catholic doctrine and practices were wrong. Of course it is not so. I made the mistake, and I have suffered for it."

"Then what becomes of your foolish pretence that you have given in to Lady Wrotham for the sake of influencing *her?* By your own showing you have not attempted to do so, and of course nobody ever supposed that you had."

"I think we might make an end of these recriminations,

William; they are not dignified. We will let Lady Wrotham go her own way, and we will go ours, as before."

"No," said her husband decidedly. "If you think that I can completely overlook all that has happened lately, and that we can go on, as you say, as before, you are mistaken. It is not possible. If you had come to me with any signs of contrition for your behaviour, I might have forgiven you, and tried to help you to get right. You do no such thing. The ideas you have in your mind now are just as mean and base as they were. You have simply turned them in another direction. Listen to me, and don't speak until I have done. I will tell you now, once for all, what I think of your behaviour. In all the troubles we have been going through here, in the trouble that has come to Mrs. Redcliffe, and the way it has destroyed the peace and the friendship of years, in the misguided zeal of Lady Wrotham and the un-Christian strife she has brought into this place, it is your actions and your attitude that have most shocked and grieved me. The other disturbances, serious as they are, are nothing to them. You have always had great infirmities of temper. I have told you so frequently, and in your better moods you have not denied it. You have always been liable to be actuated by malice and resentment, and other unworthy feelings. But lately you have gone beyond all bounds. I have hardly known you. It has almost seemed as if you were taken possession of by some evil spirit. And ——"

But Mrs. Prentice could bear no more. She rose and confronted him, quivering with rage. "How dare you talk to me in that way?" she said. "To say that I—your wife—am in possession of an evil spirit! How dare you! It is the wickedness around me that I have been trying to fight, which you are too blind to see, and which you—yes, you, a priest—are taking part in. That is where the evil spirit is. Oh, how dare you say that it is in me?"

The Vicar sat down at his table and buried his head in his hands. "I can only hope," he said quietly, "that you will come to see your faults in their true light. There can be no confidence between us till you do, and no peace or satisfaction in this house."

"Very well, then," said Mrs. Prentice spitefully, "we must go on in the absurd way in which we have been going on lately. A delightful state of things, upon my word! A husband and wife, in a position in which they ought to be looked up to, hardly speaking to one another. And who started that state of things, I should like to know? I, who am politely told that I am possessed of a devil? Oh, no, not at all."

"No, you did not start it," replied the Vicar, "but you might have stopped it at any time you pleased. You may stop it now if you will bethink yourself and put away all the evil thoughts to which you have given yourself over. Oh, Agatha, you were not always like this. Can't you see how wrong you are? Can't you see how you are despising the spirit of that religion of which you are always talking? Have you never heard of humility, and penitence, and love, and ——"

"You may keep that for your next sermon," interrupted Mrs. Prentice rudely. "I am not here to be preached at. All I have to say is that until you apologize to me for the disgraceful language you have used to me, and the abominable charge you have brought against me, I will have nothing more to do with you. Goodness knows, there won't be much difficulty. You have hardly spoken a civil word to me for the last two months. I am getting used to it. I have tried once or twice to bring you to a better frame of mind. But I shall try no more; it is useless. You must come to your senses by yourself." And with that she left him, sustained presumably by her own integrity, for it is difficult to

see what else she had to sustain her. Her husband sat on, with his head in his hands, and his heart as heavy as lead.

It grew little lighter as the weeks went by. Mrs. Prentice was as good as her word, and made no further effort to bridge the gulf that now gaped between them. She took up once more, and with renewed effort, her work of directing such of the parishioners of Exton as would listen to her in the ecclesiastical paths she would have them follow. She worked furiously to this end, and in all she said and did, going from house to house in the village, and tramping along the dusty roads to whatever point she judged she might find material to be manipulated, she showed, as plainly as if she had cried it aloud, the spirit that led her. Lady Wrotham and Lady Wrotham, and always Lady Wrotham was in her mind, and often on her tongue. She would have walked the roads with bare feet to induce one poor woman to refuse a summons to Lady Wrotham's weekly meetings, and judged no pains too great to get the refusal made in a way that would offend the great lady. In her wilful and determined spite, she even openly bribed some of the mothers to defy Lady Wrotham in the matter of sending their children to the services to which she objected. In these matters she may have persuaded herself that she was actuated by religious motives, but she persuaded no one else. She had never been a favourite at the best of times, and her ministrations had been accepted, if at all, because of the temporal advantages by which they were accompanied, for she had been to considerable extent the dispenser of Sir Joseph Chapman's local charities. This fact had stood her in better stead than she had been aware of during her temporary alliance with Lady Wrotham. But now that she was no longer the most important lady in the village, and there was little to be gained by concealing individual dislike to her, and little to be lost by indulging in its expression, opposition burnt fiercely against her. Among the

better class of people her treatment of Mrs. Redcliffe, and her toadying to Lady Wrotham, which was quite clearly understood and remorselessly commented on, had gained her a very unenviable reputation, and not a few doors were shut upon her by the farmers and tradespeople. Old Mrs. Witherspoon, and some others, before closing their doors, told her exactly what they thought of her, and it was not pleasant hearing. Among the cottagers her success was very little greater, and the fact that she was known to object strongly to their attending the ministrations of Lady Wrotham did more to crowd the weekly meetings at the Abbey than the requests of Lady Wrotham herself.

But still she held on in her insensate spite and bitterness, disliked by most of her neighbours, and despised by not a few; a miserable woman, if ever there was one, but determined to drink her cup of rancour to the dregs.

It is possible to pity her, but far more to be pitied was her husband, a good, ordinary man, over whose head the years had passed easily, for he had adapted himself to the corners of his wife's temper before they had acquired their recent sharpness, and had plodded on with his daily work, meeting with few drawbacks that could disturb him; a man with some depths of truth and insight in him, although those depths had been somewhat overlaid by the conventions of his profession. Now he began to lose heart. His wife's hot advocacy of the religious views he had spent his life in inculcating did him far more harm than Lady Wrotham's open opposition; but that opposition was tireless, although it worked chiefly beneath the surface. Lady Wrotham had been beaten in her attempt to browbeat him, she had been beaten in the matter of her complaint to the bishop, but she was beating him none the less, slowly taking the life out of all his work amongst the people over whom she exercised a greater authority than his, although he had ministered to them for as many years as she

had lived amongst them for weeks. He saw men and women on whose minds he thought he had made an indelible mark turning against him; he saw active opposition growing steadily in matters where before there had been nothing worse than indifference; he was met with argument by those who had listened obediently to instruction. He was no longer the accepted teacher of his parishioners; in some quarters his teaching was flouted and himself hardly treated with toleration. And he had no ease, no refreshment in his home. He shared it with an obstinate, jealous woman, whose determined attitude through many weeks was of acid hostility, which at times seemed to him more than he could bear. He was tempted more than once to give in to her on her own terms and gain a little of the contentment which had gone out of his life by an ignominious surrender. He might have done so if her attitude had been a little less uncompromisingly offensive, for he was not formed by nature to fight without any help or sympathy against overwhelming odds, but her contemptuous, self-satisfied manner would have made it difficult to approach her in any case, and to do so would certainly have meant the giving up of all that was left to him to fight for.

For a few weeks after Whitsuntide the only people of his own class in Exton with whom he could associate on friendly terms were the Dales. It is possible that under other circumstances he would not have seen much of Mr. Dale, whose views were opposed to his own upon most subjects, and with whom he had little in common. And Mrs. Prentice's treatment of the newcomers had earned her a feeling of frank dislike on their part, so that anything like friendly intercourse between the two houses was out of the question. But when the Vicar had called at the Lodge, Mr. Dale, after the first few minutes, during which he had been watchful and a trifle suspicious, had thawed into his usual state of blustering geniality, and the Vicar had gone again to see him, and then

again, until it became a habit with him to smoke a pipe with Mr. Dale for half-an-hour or so every afternoon or evening. The man was loud and vulgar, no doubt, but he was sure of himself, and breathed an air of bluff honesty and kindliness which the poor, harassed Vicar found grateful. Dependent as he was upon sympathy, he came in time to confide more of his troubles to Mr. Dale than he would at first have thought possible, considering how far apart they were in their views and their training; and Mr. Dale rose to the occasion and gave him much sound advice, and, what was more to the point, treated him with unfailing friendliness.

"I don't understand much about your Church," he said on one occasion as they were sitting out on the lawn, smoking two of the special brand of waistcoated cigars. "And of course I needn't tell you, Mr.—er, that what I believe is nearer to what her ladyship believes than what you believe. Still, it don't seem to me to matter so much what you teach people as the example you set them, and it can't do anybody any good to see these upsets going on round them in the name of religion. It ain't religion at all; it's the other thing."

"I teach them what I believe to be the truth," said the Vicar, "and I have been here for over twenty years, and have seen—I am sure I have seen—that it has affected the people for good. Surely that is the test. Lady Wrotham thinks that anybody who holds the views that I hold is going straight to perdition, and she says so to everybody who will listen to her. But any one who takes note of the spirit there is in the place now, and compares it with what there was a few months ago, must see the difference, and how much for the worse it is. It does not *look* as if her religion were right and mine were wrong. It is my only encouragement that my teaching has borne so much better fruit."

"What's good in her religion is the same as what's good in

yours," returned Mr. Dale. "If you had held her views you'd have done just as well, perhaps better, and there wouldn't have been this upset. Still, I don't hold with the way she's working against you, whether she's right or wrong in her doctrines. I've seen a lot of harm come of that in my Church—people who have got the money and the power, setting themselves against a minister. I've always backed up the minister myself, and I've been able to smooth things over in that way once or twice, as I've had a say in what takes place. They wouldn't go against me if they could help it. Too much money behind me. I suppose her ladyship has got the power to give you notice if she likes to exercise it, eh?"

"No, she has not got that power," said the Vicar grimly, "although she would very much like to have it."

"What—the bishop, then, I suppose?"

"No, no one has the power to remove an incumbent—at least not for any cause that I should be likely to give them. A living is the incumbent's freehold."

"Well, that seems a funny thing. However——"

"I don't say that I should consider myself justified in keeping to my legal rights and staying on in a place where my usefulness had departed. I would not do it. And I have begun to think that I may have to leave Exton. I have been bitterly disappointed to find that the impression I thought I had made on my parishioners, many of whom have grown up around me, is not so lasting as I had thought. If I find that I can no longer influence them for good, I shall go."

"I hope you won't do that, Mr.—er—Prentice. You've got friends here. I wish I could do more myself. I don't like being in a position where I can't make myself felt. I've been accustomed to have my say in these matters. But there don't seem to be anybody to say it to here. Of course, Lady Wrotham—well, she's Lady Wrotham. We didn't expect to be treated on equal terms with her or people like her when we

came here. We just wanted to live quietly, mother and me and the young ones, without pushing ourselves forward. Her ladyship did come up to see mother and left her a card. Mary said it was a friendly call, just as it might be you or me, and mother ought to go and return it. But I don't know. We never had much to do with ladies of title and don't want to specially, being quite contented as we are; but I've been a public man, and shouldn't hesitate to put myself against Lady Wrotham or anybody if I saw occasion for it—in a public way, you know, not private."

"I don't think you could do much good in these circumstances, Mr. Dale," said the Vicar; "but I like to come and talk things over with you occasionally."

"Ay, and you're welcome, Mr.—er. You're welcome to come here just whenever you like and as often as you like. You can't come too often for me. And the wife would say the same if she was here. There's just one thing, talking of the wife, that perhaps you won't mind my saying. I don't think your good lady, from what I've heard, is doing much to help you amongst the people here, though she's working hard, and I'm sure she'd be shocked to hear that she was doing harm. But she's too much against her ladyship. You see, Mr.—er—Prentice, even if her ladyship is wrong, it—well, you know what I mean, let her alone, and go on with what you've got to do. I believe that's the ticket. You'll get on better that way."

"I quite agree with you," said the Vicar.

"You don't mind my mentioning it, do you? If you were just to give her a hint."

"I am afraid that a hint from me would not be effective, Mr. Dale. My eyes are fully opened to what you say, but my wife and I unfortunately are not agreed on this subject. I hope some day that we may be. And now I must really be going."

Mr. Dale, a little later in the evening, took counsel with Mrs. Dale.

"It's my belief, mother," he said, "that our good friend must have a lot to put up with. That managing lady of his will manage him out of the place if she's not careful. I don't think they get on together. That's my idea from something he let fall."

Mrs. Dale smiled at him. "Why, father," she said, "it's the common talk of the place. She won't have a word to say to him, and if she could smother Lady Wrotham under a feather bed she'd do it. She is a terrible woman."

"Why, mother! I've never heard you speak like that of any one before."

"I dare say not; but it's true all the same, and very glad I am that Mrs. Prentice didn't take to us, for if she was to come in and see me now, I should take and show her the door."

"Would you, mother?" said Mr. Dale admiringly. "Well, I don't know but what you'd be right. But, lor', we seem to have come and settled down in a nest of hornets."

CHAPTER XXXIII

LADY SYDE INTERVENES

High Summer settled down upon Exton. The roses bloomed and faded, the trees lost the freshness of Spring and put on a cloak of monotonous green, the hay-fields, shorn of their luxuriant growth, grew sunburnt. The moons filled and waned, and twice a day the river flowed into its broad channel and ebbed again to the sea. The many dials of nature registered the steady march of time and the passing of men's lives, so active and anxious in the minutes, flowing and ebbing to quick joy or sorrow, so level in the months, with recurrent crises welded into an even progression, and individual life itself of little account when merged in the long tale of years, or thrown into the aggregate of lives with which it intermixes. What mattered the little problems and upheavals that troubled the few souls with which we have concerned ourselves to those who lived around them? The Manor of Exton supported some hundreds of people, who tilled the ground and reaped the harvests, bought and sold, laughed and wept, loved and hated, lived their lives and were swept away at the end of them, with nothing left behind of all their thoughts and activities that could keep their memory green for more than a few short years. Perhaps the chief effect upon them of the disturbances which had followed Lady Wrotham's arrival in Exton was that it gave them something to talk about which interested them, and so the pleasures of the many balanced the difficulties of the few and the compensating pendulum of common life swung as truly as before.

And so in a smaller way the absorbing business of each day smoothed over the difficulties that were exercising the

chief characters in our story. Even Mrs. Prentice, obsessed with a devouring passion, had to eat and drink, sleep and wake and clothe herself, manage her household and engage in various outside duties that were not all directed to the end she chiefly had in view at this time; and there were times in which her husband, in spite of the growing discomfort of his life, forgot his troubles in a book, took pleasure in his garden or in the summer woods and fields, was uplifted in his religious duties, or lost sight of his own difficulties in dealing with those of his parishioners. And so with Lady Wrotham, living alone in her great house, and not at all pleased with the way things were going on around her, applying herself as far as she could, and day after day, to bend circumstances to her own will, the days and weeks passed and she endured them, living through a great proportion of her hours in the way she had always lived them. At the end of her life this troubled year would not stand out conspicuously different from the rest of her years. The common everyday duties and occupations would smooth down the roughness, as light, persistent sea ripples wash smooth the children's sand castles, even before the heavy tide covers them.

But certainly, at this time, she could not have called herself happy. The difference between what her life was at Exton and what she had hoped it would be was sufficiently marked. During those few weeks after Whitsuntide, when she was left to herself, she would drive out in the afternoon, past the White House, its windows curtained and the wealth of roses in its garden wasting their fragrance, past the closed house in the village which Norah O'Keefe had forsaken for the excitements of London, past the gate of the vicarage which she had never entered, and the Lodge which she never intended to enter again. She would drive into the forest and see the Forest Lodge standing silent and empty

against its background of trees, or up through the woods behind the Abbey where the smoke of Turner's house rose into the air, two other houses which she also told herself she would never enter, but gained no satisfaction from the telling. And sometimes she would meet Mrs. Prentice in the village or on the country roads, and that lady would stare at her rudely with the corners of her mouth drawn down and her nostrils breathing defiance; or the Vicar would pass her and raise his hat gravely and without a smile; or one of the numerous Dale family, very obviously enjoying themselves as if the place belonged to them. She could not escape these small annoyances, and they affected her spirits and darkened her thoughts.

Turner and Browne came back after a fortnight, and she asked Browne to dine with her. But he made an excuse and she did not ask him again. The Redcliffes prolonged their visit to Warwickshire and Norah O'Keefe stayed in London until the end of July. Summer holiday-makers began to come into Exton, on brakes and bicycles and motor-cars. They filled the luncheon-room of the inn on most days, hung about the bridge and inspected the ruins of the Abbey. But with all the coming and going and the life in the village and on the land, there was an air of desertion in the place to those who knew it. Lady Wrotham had relations and intimate friends staying with her from time to time, but not many of them, and her life undoubtedly was a dull one, and she, for a woman with such activity of mind, had cause for depression.

At the beginning of August the tide of affairs once more began to flow. The Ferrabys came down to the Forest Lodge with another party of guests, whose object was to get as much amusement as possible out of Cowes Regatta. Norah O'Keefe came back with them, and the Redcliffes returned about the same time to the White House. At a

few hours' notice, too, Lord Wrotham came to pay his mother another visit, not, she supposed, for the sole pleasure it afforded him to be with her.

He came about half-an-hour before dinner-time. "I suppose," she said when she had greeted him, "that I am not to have the honour of seeing very much of you, George. Are you dining here to-night?"

"Yes, mother," he said. "I want to have a talk with you."

He was lounging in an easy-chair opposite to her own, but got up and began to pace the floor, with his hands in his pockets. He could never sit still for very long in one place and this was his usual habit. But there was something in his manner that was not usual. She threw a quick glance at him and saw him disturbed, a look of anxiety on his young pleasant face, which was generally so cheerful and alert. "I must go up-stairs now," she said. "But we can talk after dinner." He accompanied her to the door of the room and opened it for her. He was usually careless of these little attentions. She wondered what he could have to say to her.

She was a little surprised when the object of his visit was disclosed to her later in the evening. He was in anxiety as to money. Her own income was a large one, and she had already helped him in difficulties that had arisen during the adjustment of his own and his father's affairs. But he had not approached her with the diffidence which sat on him now. He had asked her airily for money, and taken it with no more than perfunctory thanks.

"You ought not to be in difficulties again so soon, George," she said. "I made things perfectly easy for you six months ago. You cannot expect to spend just as much as you wish to while the duties are being paid off. You ought to adjust your expenditure."

"I know, mother," he said. "But I want to get straight. I'd live quietly and pay you back what you lend me."

"You know I should not ask you to do that. I will give you what you ask for. But I should like to know why you are obliged to ask me for such a large sum."

"I suppose you know pretty well," he said. "Racing, chiefly. And I've lent a lot of money which I can't get back."

He spoke so dejectedly that the reproaches which were on her lips were not uttered. "To whom have you lent money?" she asked. "And why cannot you get it back?"

"I suppose you know that pretty well too," he replied.

Her face became angry. "Is it Laurence?" she asked sharply.

He nodded.

"George!" she exclaimed. "Why will you make a friend of Laurence? Surely you must have found out his selfishness and badness by this time! I have implored you time and again not to do so. He will be the ruin of you, as it is well known he has been the ruin of other younger men than himself whom he sponges on. He is no fit companion for you. He makes what use he can of you and thinks only of himself all the time. He would throw you over to-morrow if he thought it was to his advantage to do so. Why cannot you make up your mind to break with him? You must do so once and for all. I will not help you now unless you give me your promise."

"I've done that already," he said. "I don't want to have anything more to do with the fellow, confound him!"

Lady Wrotham showed her astonishment. "You have quarrelled with him!" she exclaimed. "Is it about this money that he owes you?"

"No. He's welcome to the money. I shall never see it again, and I never expected that I should."

"Well, what is it about, then?"

He sprang up and began to pace the room. "It doesn't matter what it is about," he said. "I won't have anything more to do with him."

She looked at him irresolutely, uncertain whether to question him further. Something in his appearance aroused her solicitude. He looked worried and anxious. "If there is anything that troubles you," she said, "I wish you would tell me. I should like to help you, if I can."

He walked up and down the room with his eyes on the ground. Some surviving instinct of his boyhood urged him to confide in his mother, to whom he had had no intention of telling what was in his mind.

"I don't know whether you'll be pleased or annoyed," he said jerkily. "I've met the woman I want to marry. You've said for the last few years that you would like to see me married."

She was taken aback, and an uneasy memory rose to her mind.

"It is not—not any one living here?" she asked.

"Yes it is. I expect you know. And Laurence—confound him—he's doing all he can against me—I don't believe he wants her himself. I'm hanged if I believe he wants her, though I did think he did at first. He's not the sort of chap to marry where there isn't a lot of money. He's told me he wouldn't, dozens of times. Then why can't he leave her alone and let me have my chance? I believe it would be a good one if it wasn't for him."

Lady Wrotham had listened to this speech with mixed feelings, surprise in the end overcoming disappointment. "Who are you talking of?" she asked. "I thought you meant Miss Redcliffe."

He laughed a little ruefully. "No, I don't mean Miss Redcliffe," he said. "She's a charming girl, but I believe she's booked already. I mean Norah O'Keefe.

Lady Wrotham was unfeignedly surprised. She hardly knew whether to be encouraging or antagonistic. But the feeling which Norah had aroused in her mind when she had first seen her renewed itself and brought pleasure with it unbidden.

"You surprise me very much, George," she said. "I did not know that you had seen much of Mrs. O'Keefe. You did not know her before I came here, did you?"

"No. But I saw a lot of her when I came down here at Whitsuntide, and she has been in town ever since. I tell you, mother, it's serious this time. Really, sometimes I feel desperate about it. I can't do anything for thinking of her. And you've no idea what she's like. I'm sure you'd love her like anything, yourself, if I was fortunate enough to marry her, and she'd make a jolly good wife and do everything she ought to wherever we settled down. I wish to goodness things would go right."

"I do know her a little," said Lady Wrotham. "It is not the sort of marriage I have ever had in my mind for you, George, and I must take a little time to get used to the idea. But I will not say anything against it, if you are really in earnest. I should be very displeased, for her sake, if I thought that you were simply amusing yourself with her."

Her tone said more than her words. He had an impulse of gratitude towards her. "Oh, mother!" he said, "you needn't talk about my being in earnest. I'm in deadly earnest. I wish you could do something to help me."

"I don't know that I am prepared to do anything to help you. I must think it over. Certainly I have nothing against her; but unfortunately she does think that she has something against me, and if I would I don't know that I could help you."

"But surely you wouldn't let these little local squabbles stand in the way, when there's so much at stake."

"That is hardly the way to describe what has been going on here. And, as far as the affair with Mrs. Redcliffe goes, I have tried to put an end to it, and without success. I can make no further efforts in that direction. My overtures have been rejected. I can only hope that Mrs. Redcliffe and her daughter, since they will not make friends with me, will see the advisability of going elsewhere. Then I do not know that there would be anything against my making friends with Mrs. O'Keefe, which, for my part, I should be pleased to do. But what did you mean just now when you mentioned Miss Redcliffe?"

"Oh, I think Frankie Redcliffe, her cousin, wants to marry her. He'll have a jolly good wife, if she'll take him."

"Oh! Have you heard if there is an engagement?"

"No, not definitely."

"I believe they have come back here."

"Have they? Well, look here, mother, what am I to do? She came down here yesterday, and I thought I'd come down too and see how I got on. But the Ferrabys are here, and hanged if Laurence hasn't invited himself there and come down with them. I'm sick of it. I can't get rid of him. I had it out with him a week ago. Hang it, I've done a good deal for him, one way and another, and he ought to clear out and leave the field open. I told him so."

"What did he say?"

"He was infernally offensive. I don't know any fellow that can make himself more pleasant than he can, or as disagreeable either. He told me to clear out myself and that I was annoying him by getting in his way. I lost my temper at that, because he spoke just as if—well, at any rate, I want to marry her, and I don't believe he wants anything of the sort, and the way he spoke—I don't know, it simply put me in a rage—for her sake, I mean. Good heavens! When I think of her just as if she was an angel, or something of that

sort—and to know that he's running after her just to amuse himself. I hate the fellow, and I've done with him."

"He is a wicked man, selfish and bad through and through. I am glad that you have been brought to see it at last. But what about her, George? Cannot she see it too?"

"No. To do the beast justice he can be as fascinating as it is possible for a fellow to be. Even men feel it; I've felt it myself, as you know; and as for women, I don't believe there's one of them could resist him if he set his mind to it."

Lady Wrotham snorted; there is no other word that would indicate the noise she produced. "Indeed," she said, "I think you exaggerate his attractions. There must be very many women who would see through him at once and only be repelled by him."

"I don't think so, mother; not young women. Why should they? She doesn't for one. I don't believe she really cares for him, but I think she's fascinated. I don't believe there's a chance for me till he's out of the way."

"I think, George, if you are really in earnest, you should try your chance. If she can prefer Laurence to you she is not what I take her to be. You might find—I hope you would—that you were quite mistaken."

"No, mother. It's no good. She's very friendly and all that, but there's nothing more. I should only look a fool. She'd have nothing to say to me now. I know that as well as anything. Well, it's of no use grousing about it. I must wait my time. She'll be here now for some time and he can't always be here. Only I'm afraid of what will happen. Upon my word I am afraid."

Lady Wrotham became thoughtful. "I think perhaps," she said presently, "that something may be done. I will think over it, George. You must leave me to think over it. What you have said has surprised me, and I must collect my

thoughts. But I think on the whole I am glad to hear your news. I cannot say more than that now. But we will talk of it again, and I do not think that you need lose heart."

"What can you do, mother?" he asked. "I don't see what you can do."

"I cannot tell you that yet. But you may believe that I will do what I can to help you."

"But you'll do something. You have got an idea in your mind. You'll try to do something."

"Yes, I will. And now we must go into the hall for prayers. It is ten o'clock."

The invaluable Riddell found her mistress disinclined for conversation as she prepared her that evening for her nightly slumbers. She had collected various scraps of information during the day with which to regale those august ears. She had heard that Mrs. O'Keefe had returned to her little house at Exton and expressed herself immediately as dissatisfied with its dimensions, and had said further that she still liked living in the country occasionally but was no longer sure that she cared to bury herself completely from one end of the year to the other; also that Miss Redcliffe had regained the high spirits for which she had been noted before the late troubles had subdued them, and had let fall something which might reasonably be interpreted as meaning that she and her mother would not remain much longer at the White House; also that young Mr. Prentice had come into a large fortune and was already beginning to spend it, that Mrs. Prentice had gone up to London to stay a night with him, as he refused under existing circumstances to come to Exton and stay a night with her; also that the Vicar had told Mr. Browne that he should have to leave Exton, and that Mr. Browne had said that he should probably have to leave too; with various other scraps concerning the party at Forest Lodge, the sayings of the Dale family, and a

few sifted fragments of village gossip which altogether made a more than usually rich feast. But the great lady had retired into her own thoughts, and her ears were closed to Riddell's tentative offerings, and Riddell was far too wise to set forth a banquet for which her mistress had no appetite.

Lady Wrotham had much to think about. Perhaps one of her chief desires was to see her son married and to hold his children on her knees. She was ambitious for her husband's family. She had married not very early in life and her only child had not been born until ten years after her marriage, at a time when the birth of an heir had almost begun to be despaired of. He had been delicate in the early years, and although he had now outgrown his childish weakness, the fears and anxieties of thirty years before had left their mark upon her. And, to strengthen her natural desire to see his children growing up to continue the long line of his ancestors, was the ever present and growing dislike of Laurence Syde, who would succeed him if he did not marry and beget a son. She hated Laurence Syde with all her powers of hatred, and would almost have welcomed any marriage, however unsuitable, if it held out the hope of offspring.

She had told herself, when he had disclosed his desires to her, that it would need careful thought on her part before she could make up her mind to accept Norah O'Keefe as a possible bride for her son. It was not the sort of marriage she had looked forward to for him. She would have liked him to marry a young girl, of high birth, and preferably with a big dower, not a widow with a small income of her own, which for all she knew might not even continue if she married again. But now she found, when she set herself to consider the question, that it had already decided itself in her mind. When Norah O'Keefe had walked into her room a month or two before, she had walked straight into her heart, and the estrangement which had immediately followed, had not sufficed to de-

pose her image. She found her heart throwing out strong tentacles to draw the girl to her. The lover's desire of her son reflected itself in her own feelings, and aroused an excitement in her mind which was something more than the shadow of his. That question had settled itself and need not be discussed. It would give her keen pleasure to receive Norah as her daughter-in-law and to yield up what rights she still retained to her. Then she must think of how she could help him to gain his happiness and hers. Her mother's heart, which beat warmly for him underneath all the friction and disappointment that had overlaid their relationship, was stirred by his appeal to her. He had thrown off her influence and derided her authority; she had been nothing in his life for many years, except an annoyance, and he had shown her that it was so. But now he had come to her for help, just as he had come to her believing in her power to disperse his childish troubles and relying on her to do so, and if she could she would show that he had done right to come to her. She would give him what he wanted, and when he had attained his happiness he would owe it to her, and there would be peace and affection between them as in the old days. So the future pictured itself to her and refreshed her present loneliness.

Could she go to Norah and open out her heart to her and plead for her son? How would she be received? She made light of what had already passed between them. She had an idea, gained she scarcely knew whence, though it had actually come to her through Riddell's gossip, that Norah was not quite so friendly as she had been with the Redcliffes. She did not think that that obstacle to intimacy would prove insurmountable, and it did not trouble her in her softer mood that she would have to give up something of her autocratic habit by taking such a step. But she felt that the time was not ripe for it. She might destroy George's chances altogether. He had said that he could not approach her himself

now with any hope of success, and he would not be diffident in such matters unless with strong reason. No, she could not do that. It was Laurence, the hated Laurence who stood in the way, and she burned to confound his knavish tricks and destroy him utterly.

She thought long over the question, made plans and rejected them, and touched the dark waters of impotence more than once in her gropings. She hated him, but she was powerless to affect him by her hatred. Then suddenly the light shone. She could do nothing to hamper his movements herself, but there was some one else who could. He was dependent on his stepmother, and Lady Syde could, if she would, influence him by the cold power of the purse. Could she be persuaded to do so? Lady Wrotham thought that she might, and she determined to use every effort to induce her to use her power. It was fortunate that Lady Syde at this time was staying with her nephew, Richard Baldock, at Beechhurst, not many miles away. She would send her a telegram and drive over to see her the next day. It would be a very long drive there and back, but she could manage it by starting early and resting for some hours in the middle of the day, and she would not shrink from the fatigue.

Her mind lightened. She had a plan and could yet show that George had done well to consult her. She threw off the weight of anxious thought and turned an ear to Riddell, who was enabled to ply her with the more important dishes of her banquet before she finally retired to rest.

Fortune smiled on her the next morning, for she had a note from Lady Syde announcing her intention of motoring over to Exton to luncheon. Wrotham was away yachting with the Ferrabys, and the two ladies were alone together. Lady Wrotham disclosed her news after luncheon, but waited to know what her sister-in-law had to say before making the request that she had determined to make.

"That is indeed rather startling news," said Lady Syde. "And you are not displeased, Sarah? You would like him to marry her?"

"Yes, I should," said Lady Wrotham. "I was not sure at first. But she is in every way worthy of the position."

"You—er—have not got on very well with her so far, have you?"

"Matters stand much as they did when I told you of all that had happened here; but I believe the Redcliffe girl is going to be married, and the Redcliffes will not be here much longer, and ——"

"You will be pleased at that. Who is she going to marry?"

"They have been staying with Sir Francis Redcliffe in Warwickshire and I believe she is engaged to him. That is what I hear. It will be a good match for her. I wish that I had been able to be on friendly terms with them. I should have taken an interest in the affair. However, that is not to be thought of, and I hope it is true that they are both going. I think there is rather less intimacy between them and Mrs. O'Keefe than there used to be. I own I was very much afraid that it was this Miss Redcliffe whom George had been attracted by. There were indications that it was so, and I dare say if he paid her attentions, which he did do, and then left her for the other, that might account for their not being such good friends. At any rate I do not think she would refuse me if I approached her now, but I do not think it would be of any use at present because—and this is what I want to tell you, Henrietta—Laurence is pursuing her, for what reason I would rather not ask myself—I do not think it can be a good one—and from what George told me, I believe he has succeeded in captivating her attention, if not more than that."

"Laurence! But she is not rich, is she?"

"She can hardly be rich from the way in which she lives,

Two thousand a year at the very outside. Probably much less."

"But Laurence could not possibly marry any one with only two thousand a year. At least he would not."

Lady Wrotham's eyes burned. "I do not think he has the least intention of marrying her. He would be very glad, no doubt, to prevent George from marrying her, or from marrying at all, if he could. And there are other reasons why a man like Laurence might pursue a beautiful woman. We need not go into that. He and George have quarrelled, and I am unfeignedly glad of it. But——"

"Do you mean to say that she prefers Laurence to George? Very few women would, with all George has to offer."

"She might not consider that, if Laurence had thrown her off her balance. She is very young and has not seen much of the world. We know—I don't like to acknowledge it, but it is so—that Laurence has the power to attract women. He has proved it, to their hurt, before this. But I do say, Henrietta, that it is a shocking thing that this should be going on. George is in earnest about it. He is very much in love with her, and she would make him a good wife. And if Laurence were out of the way, I have no doubt that she would accept him. I can hardly doubt it. George is very attractive too, of course in a quite different way, and he has, as you say, much to offer. And think of what the end may be if Laurence does not want to marry her, but still lays siege to her. It is dreadful to think of, and we know what has happened before."

"That shall not happen again if I can prevent it," said Lady Syde. "The story to which you allude was what finally destroyed all the affection I had at one time for him. I will prevent it, Sarah. I have a hold over him, although unfortunately it is no more than the power of denying him money. But still, that is what he cares more about than anything, and

I will take very strong measures indeed to prevent his interfering any further. I promise you that."

Lady Wrotham was touched to gratitude. "I thank you very much, Henrietta," she said. "I hoped you would be able to do something, and I am glad you see with me in what must be done. It is the only way."

"I will stop every penny of his allowance unless he gives me his word not to see her or communicate with her. I will not have it. I am determined to stop it. I have the power to do so and I will use it."

Whether her reiterated assurances were derived from a consciousness of her power or were prompted by some doubt as to its efficacy, they brought a sense of reliance and comfort to Lady Wrotham. And in the end they justified themselves, for a few days later Lady Wrotham received the following letter from her —

"My dear Sarah,

"I have done what I said I would do. I sent for Laurence to come and see me. He said he was engaged every day, but I *insisted* and he came. There was a *scene!* But I was firm. I do not fear his violence in the least, and I reproached him with ingratitude. That had very little effect, but my threats he could not afford to ignore. He leaves Exton to-day—I insisted upon that, and will not go there again or see her or write to her. I am glad I have been able to do this for you, and hope everything will now go *well.*

"In haste, yours affectionately,

"Henrietta Syde.

"P.S.—I have undertaken to pay Laurence's debts *for the last time*, and to increase his allowance to fifteen hundred a year. It will leave me a poor woman, but do not tell anybody."

Henrietta had behaved nobly. Lady Wrotham felt that, and George felt it too when she imparted her news to him.

"The way that fellow has sponged on Aunt Henrietta is beyond everything," he said. "And, mind you, mother, Uncle Franklin was just as bad, though he had the grace to do it without making himself unpleasant. Laurence has made a hard bargain with her; that's quite plain. And she's acted like a trump. Well, I do believe I've got a chance now, and if I have I owe it all to her."

And with this expression of gratitude Lady Wrotham had to be content.

CHAPTER XXXIV

LORD WROTHAM PROPOSES

If Mrs. Ferraby had been asked the direct question whether she would prefer that a friend of hers should marry George Wrotham, or his cousin Laurence Syde, she would certainly have given her decision in favour of Wrotham. She knew very well that Laurence, in spite of his birth and his assured position in the world of fashion, was an adventurer, and that a woman who should give her life and happiness into his keeping would run a grave risk of rueing her bargain. And yet, when he told her, as he did, with cynical frankness, the reason why he was obliged to cut short his visit to her, she was greatly annoyed on his behalf.

"Surely," she said, "George can't know of this. He would never consent to take advantage of you in that underhand way. Why, it is bribery."

"Quite so," replied Laurence; "and I have taken the bribe. I can't afford not to. That old lady is in a position to ruin me if I don't do what she tells me, and she'd do it. I dare say it would be very noble of me to tell her to go to the deuce, and set about earning my living by the sweat of my brow. But as there isn't a soul in the world who would have the smallest use for the sweat of my brow, that course isn't open to me."

"I don't see how you could help yourself," said Mrs. Ferraby. "But I do think it is mean of Lady Syde to use her power over you in that way, and if George knows of it, I can only say that my opinion of him is not what it was."

"Of course he knows of it," said Laurence. "He put her up to it. You don't know that young gentleman as well

a I do. Well, I hope he'll pull it off. If I can't marry her myself, I'd just as soon he married her as anybody."

"Did you really want to marry her?" asked Mrs. Ferraby, in some surprise.

He looked at her with cool impudence. "What else do you suppose I wanted?" he asked; and Mrs. Ferraby had nothing to reply.

Laurence took his departure, and Mrs. Ferraby took the first opportunity of repeating the information he had given her to Norah O'Keefe, which, as he was debarred by the terms of his agreement with Lady Syde from communicating with her herself, might possibly have been the reason of his disclosure. Norah was incensed by what she heard, but it gave her a considerable amount of food for thought, and she was more than usually quiet during the following day's expedition on the water. It certainly did not incline her towards Wrotham, and to that extent Lady Syde's diplomacy seemed to have been a complete failure, for she showed quite plainly that his attentions were distasteful to her. He went home to the Abbey a prey to acute depression of spirits. The true reason of her change of attitude did not occur to him. He knew that Laurence had promised not to communicate with her again in any way, and it never crossed his mind that he might have taken steps, without actually breaking his word, to cause the reason of his abrupt withdrawal to be conveyed to her. If he had thought of this he might have considered whether, after all, he had been justified in taking advantage of the removal of a rival after this fashion. As it was he thought only of the change, on her part, from frank friendliness to a rather marked disinclination for his society, and put it down to a stronger attraction towards Laurence than he had suspected. This caused him grave disquiet, and his eager, impatient nature impelled him to an issue. The next day was Sunday. He would go to her and

declare himself. He could hold back no longer. He must put his fortunes to the test without further delay.

He went to church on Sunday morning. Norah was not there, and he braved the talk of the village and went straight to her house. She was reading in her drawing-room, and blushed, as he thought with annoyance, when he was shown in to her.

"How do you do?" she said. "I had a headache and didn't go to church." She stood up and looked at him with a shade of defiance in her blue eyes.

"Poor lady!" he said cheerfully. "I hope it isn't very bad. The sun was very hot yesterday. Look here, wouldn't you like this blind down a little? It will be striking in on you directly."

He lowered the blind without waiting for her reply, and she resumed her seat with the momentary tension past. He sat down opposite to her. "I say," he said, "why were you so huffy with me yesterday? You'd hardly speak to me. I've not done anything to offend you, have I?"

He looked at her with friendly eyes, taking his stand on his open, cheerful nature, which it was difficult to repulse. If he had shown the flouted lover's melancholy diffidence he would have given her very little trouble.

She bent her eyes. "I don't know that I was," she said.

"Oh, but I assure you you made me feel quite dismal," he said with the same light air. "I'd have jumped overboard for twopence. We've always been good friends, haven't we? Come now, tell me what has happened."

Her instinct was to keep away from the unpleasant topic and return to the easy state of good comradeship which had always been the note of their intercourse. But there was something beneath his airy manner which told her that he would not allow her to keep away from it. She thought for a moment.

"I have heard something that has annoyed me very much," she said; "but I certainly don't want to discuss it with you."

His face grew a shade graver. "Is it about Laurence Syde?" he asked.

"Why do you press me?" she said. "Surely you don't expect me to talk to *you* about it?"

"Why not? It concerns me more than anybody."

"Very well, then, if you insist upon it, I will tell you what I think. I think it is disgraceful that you should make a bargain about me behind my back as you have done. What right have I given you to treat me in that way?"

She was going on, beginning to be agitated, but he held up his hand. "Wait a minute," he said; "I didn't know that you knew what had happened. I suppose he told you before he went away."

"No, he told me nothing. He wouldn't have dared to do so. The meanness of his action! But I won't have you think that I mind for my own sake. He is nothing to me and never has been. I ought not to have to say this, but when you force me to say anything about it at all, I ——"

"I know exactly what you feel," he interrupted again, "and you needn't be afraid of my misunderstanding you. It all came as a surprise to you, but you can't help knowing now that he didn't want to go; that's about it, isn't it? There's nothing you can blame yourself for there."

She was insensibly relieved, but her indignation held. "If he didn't want to go," she said, "he went because he was bribed to go. That is what Mrs. Ferraby says, and it is true."

"Oh, Mrs. Ferraby told you, did she? and he told her. I might have known that he would have taken some step of that sort. Well now, look here, dear lady, let's clear this up. I'll tell you what you are thinking, though it's difficult for you to put it into words yourself. You think that he and I were both in love with you, and that's true enough as far as I'm

concerned. I've come here to say so. And you think that I wanted him out of the way; and that's true. But if you think I pulled the strings to get him removed in that particular way —well, you're mistaken. I didn't."

"Oh!" she said doubtfully. The even matter-of-fact tone in which he had spoken saved her from the confusion certain of his words might have brought.

"No," he went on in the same tone, "my mother arranged that. I told her how things stood, and—well, she hasn't got much of an opinion of Major Syde, and she talked over the question with my aunt—I didn't know of it, you know, till afterwards—and they put their heads together, and you know what happened. I'm not sorry for it, you know. I'm glad. But at the same time I shouldn't quite have liked to say, 'Go in and do your best,' if they'd told me exactly what it was they were going to do."

Norah considered this frank statement perplexedly. She felt that there was a good deal more to be said, but she did not quite see how she was to say it. Wrotham again came to her rescue. "I'll be as honest with you as I possibly can," he said; "even at the risk of upsetting you. I shouldn't like to come to you in any other way. Laurence is a very fascinating fellow; I know that well enough, and I thought he was making an impression on you. I knew that couldn't lead to any good, and my mother knew it too, and Lady Syde knew it, and I give you my word that if there had been no question of what I wanted in the matter, they would have acted just the same. My mother thinks a great deal of you; I've never known her to take to any one in the same way before."

"Me!" she exclaimed in surprise. "Why, I have hardly ever spoken to her."

"Quite enough. What I say is true. She would give anything to be on friendly terms with you, and she deplores this row with the Redcliffes more for that than anything. It's

a difficult thing to say, but Laurence isn't a good chap, and you're well rid of him."

She looked at him with a shade of contempt. "Why, every one says that you and he were the greatest friends," she said.

"Perhaps we were in a way," he said; "and it's quite true that I shouldn't have taken sides against him a month or two ago. But my eyes have been opened. I'm a different fellow to what I was; you've made me different. I've got an object now, and that's what I've never had before. Do you know what that object is?"

"No—yes—Lord Wrotham, you are not fair to me. I won't answer your questions."

"Well, I'll tell you. It's to marry you, and when I've married you to spend all my time in making you happy; and, by Jove, I'll do it too. I'll think of nothing else. Let me try, won't you? You won't be sorry for it."

She was deeply distressed; she felt him to be plying her relentlessly, but she could not be unaware of the honest fervour and sincerity that underlay the evenness of his speech. "Oh, how can you?" she cried. "You are cruel—no, I don't mean that—I ought to thank you, I suppose, but, you know you have no right to ask me. I have given you no right. I have not thought of it at all. I have been friendly with you, and with Major Syde too—nothing more—and I find myself in this coil—intrigued against—and ——"

"Oh, come now, let's get that out of the way," he said, still holding the advantage of self-control over her. "You don't care for Laurence really, do you?"

Her distress changed to indignation. "You know I don't," she said; "and after the way he has behaved you ought not to ask that. It is an insult."

"Of course I don't mean it as an insult; but you must have seen that both he and I were—well, how shall I put it?

—trying to get into your good graces. You have discovered that after all he wasn't very keen about it. Very well, then, there's me left, and I'm as keen as ever I can be, and I've never been anything else."

It was perhaps hardly to be expected that he could continue walking on this very delicate ground without a slip. He had escaped the dangerous places in a wonderful way, but perhaps more by good fortune than from the tactful knowledge of what to avoid. Now he had slipped badly. He had told her that she had known all along that he and Laurence were both making love to her, but that Laurence's love-making was insincere, and she had only just found it out. What if it was all true? No woman would own to such a thing. And the clumsy, downright, male mind had missed the point that it might be all true and yet present itself in such a light to a woman as to be as good as untrue. His mother, perhaps, might have told him that it was quite possible that Norah had received the somewhat pressing attentions of himself and another man for some weeks without having once asked herself whither they tended, and that a spoken word which would seem to a man simply the inevitable timely seal of all that had gone before, might still to a woman come as a confusing sudden thunderclap, although it brought with it the flash of light which made clear all the past; he did not know it of himself, and he was staggered at the reception his words met with. She sprang up, her eyes blazing.

"How can you say such wicked things?" she cried. "What can you think of me? To say that I knew this and took part in it! It is absolutely untrue. How dare you come and say such a thing to me?"

He was quick to see his mistake, and, fortunately for him, did not lose his head. "I put it clumsily," he said.

"You'd no right to say it at all," she cried. "And it isn't true. I was friendly with you and Major Syde—and with

others—but that was all, and it is odious and—and cowardly to tell me that I meant anything more than to be friendly in your case, and to lead you both on—that is what it comes to."

"No, it doesn't," he said quietly. "Sit down; I didn't mean to offend you, and you must listen to what I say."

She sat down, rather meekly, dominated by his coolness of manner.

"Nobody knows better than I do," he said, "that you never took me very seriously. But we can put all that aside now. I've been serious all along in my own mind, and now I've come to tell you so, and to ask you to give me a chance. I love every hair of your head, and everything you say or do. I'll love you as long as I live, whether you say yes or no, and I'll wait for you as long as you like if you think I've spoken too soon. But I couldn't put it off any longer. You don't know what I feel for you. It has made quite a different man of me. You won't send me away now, will you?"

The calm putting aside of the cause of offence would hardly have sufficed for her if it had not been washed out by the tide of his passion. It was impossible to ignore the passion in his speech, although his voice was not raised above its previously level tone. It shook her, although it awoke no answering thrill of its own quality.

"I ought to be grateful to you for telling me this," she said. "I am grateful. But you must know that it is of no use. I don't want to marry again, and I have no feeling for you but one of friendliness."

"Well," he said, "I don't know that I thought it possible that you could have. At any rate, you won't withdraw that friendliness from me, will you? I shall see you when I'm down here; you won't want to keep me away from you?"

Oh, admirable young man! What instinct guides you to-

wards that difficult path which alone can lead you to your goal? It would be useless to plead; you would only arouse opposition. Put yourself in the position of a languishing rejected lover, and you would weary her to active dislike of you. Withdraw to the safe ground of friendship, and you keep alive that one little spark which your declaration has aroused. An ill-considered word will shake it into darkness. But it can be made to grow, if you give everything and ask for nothing in return. You must tread a thorny path. Your friendliness must be cheerful, whatever your feelings may be. It will receive a prompt return in cheerful friendliness, but if you are deceived by that to a renewal of love-making, out goes the spark at once. Keep yourself well in hand, and she will begin to wonder whether the friendliness conceals anything after all. Then she will try to find out, and this will be hard to resist. Tell her nothing, but continue with your devoted, always cheerful friendliness. Then the spark may begin to grow. Curiosity may nourish it; pique may fan it; and one day the friendliness which you have invoked in return for yours may smoulder into flame. In the meantime you have shown her what you are. She will no longer be afraid of your passion, for she has learned to like you, and has come to like you so much that it will not disturb her to be told that your liking for her has been ardent love all the time. Then you may pick the thorns out of your feet, and crown your brow with laurel.

"Oh, no," said Norah. "I hope we shall always be friends when we meet; but you must never talk to me of this again."

"I shan't worry you," he said; "I can take 'no' for an answer. But there's one thing I should like to ask you. Can't you make it up with my mother? She's lonely here. I don't say it isn't her fault that she's managed to set everybody against her; that's her way; but she doesn't mean it.

She'd be awfully glad to see you sometimes. It would be a real kindness to her."

Norah hesitated.

"You needn't be afraid that you'll hear anything you don't want to hear, about me or—or Laurence," he said. "I'll tell her that's all over, and she won't mention it."

"I wasn't thinking of that," she said with a blush. "I should like to see her sometimes, but —— Well, I'll see. If I can, without being disloyal to my old friends, I will."

"Thank you. I say, is it true that Miss Redcliffe is engaged to her cousin?"

"No; I should have heard of it if it were. But—I don't know that I ought to say this, but you won't repeat it, will you?—I shouldn't wonder if it did come about. He is coming down here next month; and she seems so much happier than she used to be. I *am* so glad. Both she and Mrs. Redcliffe were made dreadfully unhappy by what happened to them—and now I think they have thrown it off. Naturally they don't mind so much what people say here, now that he—Sir Francis, I mean—has shown them that he cares nothing about it. In a way it has brought them together."

"Yes, he's a good chap, old Frankie Redcliffe; and she's a nice girl. If it comes off I'll give them a jolly handsome wedding present."

She looked at him with the hint of a mischievous smile. "I thought you thought she was a nice girl," she said.

He trod unflinchingly on the first thorn. "Ah, well!" he said with resigned cheerfulness; "Frank Redcliffe thought so too."

Then he took his leave on a note of amiable bustle, shocked to discover that it was already luncheon-time, and left not a trace of awkwardness behind him, which, considering what had passed between them, was no small achievement.

Norah sat for some minutes looking out of the window.

She was relieved that the crisis had come and gone, but she was a little puzzled by it all, too. He had seemed very much in earnest until she had definitely told him that she did not want his earnestness. Then he had withdrawn instantly. It did not look as if he was so much in earnest after all. Well, it was best so. She certainly did not want to marry him, or anybody. But he was very nice; that could not be denied; and very good company. She was glad that he had taken her refusal so sensibly. There would be no awkwardness in meeting him again, and it would be possible—and pleasant—to meet him on friendly terms.

Then she went in to luncheon, and wondered what he would say and do when she met him again, and when the next meeting would take place.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE SHADOW OF CHANGE

It was a Sunday in late September. Summer, as if loth to depart, had left her sunny skirt trailing over the country, and Autumn had not yet summoned up courage to soil it with rain and wind. The cottage gardens were still gay with flowers, and the trees were in full leaf, with the added beauty of a thousand varied tints of green and gold and russet. The grass was wringing wet at dawn, but by midday the sun had licked up the moisture, and only the grateful freshness of the warm air was unlike the noons of high Summer.

The Vicar walked down from his house to the church, sad at heart, in spite of the mild beauty of the September morning, which seemed to envelop the familiar scenes through which he passed, the red-roofed houses, the cottage gardens, the river, the old Abbey buildings and the grassy stretch of park land near the church, in a golden haze. The beauty of the season added to the perennial charm of a place which he had grown to love more and more as the years had passed quietly over his head, but it only increased his sadness, for he was going to leave it all, the scenes amongst which he had worked for over twenty years, the fair home in which he had hoped to end his days, the people whom he had grown to love. He was going away to begin his work over again in new and strange surroundings, and he would end this long spell of his life, unable to feel that his work had been crowned with success, conscious only, at the last, of ruin and failure. Lady Wrotham had had her way. Most of his parishioners had turned against him. There was open strife where there had been peace and contented progress, and there was no

chance that by staying on and continuing the struggle the strife would grow less. So he had taken the plunge, and resigned his living, and now he was about to conduct his last Sunday services in Exton Abbey church, and preach his farewell sermons.

The church was full. Ever since it had become known, about a fortnight before, that Mr. Prentice was leaving, public opinion had been veering round in his favour, and now set in a strong tide of respect for him and regret for his departure. Those who had taken a prominent part in helping to drive him out of the place were severely blamed by those who had only omitted to stand up for him when their support might have been of value, and these in their turn were apologetic to the small remnant that had never wavered in their allegiance. There had been some talk of a testimonial, but there had been nobody to take the lead. Browne had been approached on the subject and Browne had delivered himself as follows. "What! Do all you can to make his life here a burden to him until he's obliged to go, and then give him a twopenny-halfpenny address badly illuminated, and a plated coffee service which he doesn't want! I'll have nothing to do with it." And the project had dropped. But there had been some consolation in the change of attitude that had come over the people during the past fortnight, and the Vicar felt, when he took his place at the reading desk, that the large congregation had not been drawn to the church merely out of curiosity, but contained many sympathetic and some regretful hearts.

Lord Wrotham sat alone in the Abbey pew. Lady Wrotham, now that she had gained the end for which she had worked so persistently, would have liked to bury the hatchet and revert at least to her first state of neutrality. But that was not possible, with Mrs. Prentice more than ever consumed with bitterness against her; nor had the Vicar been able to bring himself to ignore his defeat at her hands and

respond to her tentative advances. She had not considered it advisable to attend Exton Abbey church on this last Sunday of his ministrations, as she would have been quite ready to do, but she had compromised by staying at home instead of driving to Standon, as she had done every Sunday for some months past, and the Abbey servants were there in full force. Mrs. Prentice, also, had elected to stay at home. She had reached the stage of being without a single friend on the Manor, and to face the collected hostility and dislike of the whole parish on such an occasion as this had been beyond her. But every one else of our Exton acquaintances was there, Mrs. Redcliffe and Hilda, with Francis Redcliffe, Norah O'Keefe, the Dales, Browne and Turner, and even the Ferrabys, with one or two of the party then filling their house.

If Mr. Prentice had lost a good deal of what had hitherto made life pleasant to him, he had at any rate gained to this extent from the trouble and anxiety he had gone through, that his beliefs had become articulate. His sermon was a short one, and he made no reference in it to his approaching departure, but it affected his hearers as very few sermons of his had done during the years he had preached to them. The trite, glib sentences that had fallen so easily from his lips had vanished, and in their place was utterance, not remarkably well-fashioned, nor expressive of ideas at all out of the common, but sincere and heartfelt. He preached on charity, and where before he would have found nothing to say on the greatest of Christian themes that was not rubbed thin and smooth by constant and easy repetition, it was impossible now not to feel that everything he did say was minted from his own experience and deep conviction. He told his hearers that while it was possible to find causes of disagreement amongst Christians in every doctrine and religious practice they might uphold, this gift alone brought them all together. It was the only sure

hall-mark. There was no one, not even amongst non-Christians, who did not recognize it and do it honour. Where it was present, there was a good man or a good woman, and the grace of God could be plainly seen here by those who were blind to every other manifestation. Where it was absent nothing else was of any avail. The soul was still groping in darkness, although to outward appearance religion was its guiding light. And so, with solemn warning and exhortation, he gave his message, and there was no one in his congregation who would not have said that he himself, during the years he had lived amongst them, had practised what he preached, and, in spite of mistakes and human weakness and perhaps some follies, had set them an example that they well might follow.

Norah O'Keefe and Browne and Turner lunched at the White House on that Sunday, and their talk was naturally of the coming change in the life of the Manor. Change was in the air. It was indicated by the presence there of Francis Redcliffe, and the looks which he could not prevent himself from casting at his cousin whenever he was in her presence; by Hilda's spasmodically high spirits, frequent laughter and the warmth which she threw into her manner towards her mother, and to Norah, for by this time the cloud that had arisen to obscure their friendship had disappeared; by the treatment which Norah herself underwent at the hands of her two old admirers, in whose manner towards her there was a shade more deference than before, and a chivalry no less marked but rather less eager. But coming changes, though they cast their shadow, were not yet ripe for discussion. Only in discussing the Vicar's departure there was always this feeling underlying the talk, that it was the first change of others to follow.

"I hope the old lady's satisfied now," said Turner. "She has got her own way, and that's what very few of us get. I

suppose we shall have some snuffing, psalm-singing fellow here instead of Prentice, who'll show us the whites of his eyes and be in and out of the Abbey all day long, eh, Browne? I suppose you know all about it."

"Dacre is coming here," said Browne. "Wrotham told me so this morning. Her ladyship asked that he should be appointed."

There was a chorus of exclamation and inquiry, and Browne explained that Mr. Dacre was vicar of the church in London that Lady Wrotham affected, and had already once made an appearance at Exton.

"Well, he'll be a nice companion for you, Browne," said Turner. "You want looking after."

"I shan't be here," said Browne phlegmatically. "I'm going to move to Hurstbury and look after things from there. We fixed that up this morning too. But don't say anything outside yet."

The chorus was renewed. "I couldn't stand it any longer," said Browne. "I've had enough worry since Lady Wrotham came here to turn my hair grey, and if I hadn't been able to make some arrangement of this sort I should have gone altogether. I made up my mind a month and more ago."

Turner looked at him. "Suppose all the rest of us don't count for anything," he said.

"You needn't pretend any longer that you didn't know it," replied Browne. "And I've fixed up that little business of yours too. You can have the land at the rent you proposed."

Eyes were bent upon Turner, who showed unwonted confusion of manner. "Surely you are not going too, Captain Turner?" said Mrs. Redcliffe.

"He's going to chuck his fishes and grow fruit," said Browne. "We've let him a farm at Hurstbury."

"Then you'll both be together," said Hilda, and Norah,

with a laugh, "Did anybody think that Mr. Browne and Captain Turner could bear to be parted?"

"I didn't give him leave to say anything about it," said Turner. "But he can't keep anything to himself. His tongue will be the ruin of him yet. But I made an offer for this other place before he took it into his head to leave. That's what first gave him the idea. There never was a fellow with less originality."

"It seems to me that Lady Wrotham will be left alone in her glory here," said Francis Redcliffe.

Nobody contradicted this, although no word had been said of the Redcliffes or Norah leaving.

"That will suit her very well," said Turner, "as she can't get on with anybody in the place. Been much simpler if she'd gone away herself; then Prentice might have stayed on. It's hardest on him. You could see the poor fellow felt it this morning."

"It is very sad," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "And I feel so sorry that we cannot be with him at all now to let him see that his going is a great loss to us."

"Alone with that woman!" said Turner. "And taking her with him wherever he goes! Yes. That's his real tragedy."

"I would go to her," said Mrs. Redcliffe, "if I thought she would receive me. I think I must before they leave. It is terrible to think of them going with no one to bid them a friendly good-bye, after the years we have known them." It was plain that she felt acute distress at the thought. All that she had suffered at the hands of Mrs. Prentice was forgotten. She could only see a poor mistaken woman leaving the home in which she had lived so long, at enmity with all her little world.

But Hilda said quietly, "You can't go to her, mother. And she wouldn't see you, if you did. But I am sorry for her too."

There was a change here. It was not long since Hilda would have flamed out into bitter words against Mrs. Prentice, and held that she had got nothing worse than her deserts.

"I see her sometimes," said Browne. "I've never actually quarrelled with her."

"Hadn't got enough pluck to," interpolated Turner.

"I don't think she's particularly sorry for herself. She'd still like to put a knife into the lot of us. I wouldn't advise anybody to go near her, unless they want their heads bitten off."

The picture of the beaten woman still nursing her insane rancour, although all the foundations of her life had fallen around her, was almost terrible to contemplate. "Isn't there a son?" asked Francis. "What's become of him?"

"He's a cub," said Turner. "But he's fallen on his feet. He put all he hadn't spent of a bit of money that was left to him in some syndicate and he's making thousands a year. At least he's spending it."

No one cared to pursue the subject of Fred Prentice's doings any further, and presently the ladies left the table.

Hilda and Norah O'Keefe walked arm in arm in the garden. "Norah, I've got something to tell you," said Hilda shyly.

Norah looked at her quickly. "Oh, Hilda," she exclaimed, "I *am* so glad. Of course I know what it is."

Hilda smiled. "I suppose you do," she said. "I'm not very good at hiding things, and dear old Frank isn't either."

"He's a very lucky man," said Norah.

"It's I who am lucky. I always liked him from the very first. He's so honest and straightforward. I don't think he could hide anything if he wanted to. And I simply loved him when he came down here on purpose to make friends with us when we were going through all that trouble in the Spring. I can hardly believe that that is all over now. I don't think about it any more. He has blown it all away."

Norah responded generously. She may have remembered that she had done something too to soften that trouble to her friends. But it was not a time to insist upon sharing the credit. They talked together happily of all that Hilda's news meant to her. "Riverslea is such a lovely place," she said. "And the garden, Norah! You never saw such a garden. I am to do exactly as I like in it."

"It will be rather sad leaving this garden that you and Mrs. Redcliffe have made," said Norah.

"I shan't mind," Hilda said. "All the pleasure has gone out of this place, somehow. I hope I shall never see it again, unless —— Norah, you won't be living here much longer, shall you?"

It was like Hilda to fling out a question of this sort without warning, and Norah may have prepared herself for it, or something like it. But when it came she was taken unawares and blushed red. "Yes, of course I shall," she said hurriedly. "But tell me about Mrs. Redcliffe's house."

Hilda looked at her and saw that she was to ask nothing more concerning Norah's plans. She told her of a little old dower house on Francis Redcliffe's estate, in which her mother was to live, and Norah listened and made comments, thinking all the time of something else.

Then the men came out into the garden with Mrs. Redcliffe. Francis had told them the news, diffidently, and in the baldest language, as he poured himself out a glass of port. They all stood together in a little group, and were very friendly. Francis even ventured to put his arm round Hilda's waist with an air of proprietorship as they talked. She was his property now, and he was going to take care of her and give her everything in the world she wanted. There were congratulations and a little chaff, and some mention of the time when Exton would be deserted. But no one seemed to remember that Norah would still be left behind, and she had not

the courage to remind them of the fact, which she would have done if she had known how to meet the look with which they would have greeted the reminder.

The pleasant stir of interest and anticipation with which these coming departures were announced and received was so different from the blank depression which lay over the vicarage on this September Sunday, that it is painful to have to turn from them to that home of melancholy. There were countless little preparations to make even in the intervals of Sunday services, and no time could be spent in leisure when the shadow of disruption hung over everything. Perhaps the complete absence of confidence which had now come to be the everyday note of the intercourse between the Vicar and his wife made it easier for both of them to adapt themselves to the wrench. It had come to be a natural thing for each to guard against impulses towards the other, and this self-restraint could now be used as a defence against the appeal of inanimate objects. When both together might have mourned as they went steadily forward with the disintegration of their home, pride kept them from giving way apart, and they kept a callous face to one another, never soothing themselves with an expression of sentiment or regret. Active antagonism had died down. They had to be much together, to discuss plans and arrangements, to agree to this or that, to help each other frequently in matters where help was necessary. They met now without awkwardness, and anything like angry speech between them would have been as unlikely to happen as if they had been in perfect accord. But the gulf had not narrowed. They were as far apart in sympathy as ever, and as little likely to come together again, less likely, for custom had begun to salve over their estrangement, and the impulse to end it at any cost was no longer imperative. There were times when each of them felt this impulse, and might have acted on it if the other had felt it concurrently. But when one had been soft

the other had been hard, and it seemed as if they might settle down permanently to an unhappy existence of mutual indifference, almost mutual dislike, unless something should happen suddenly to break up the crust that was hardening over their hearts.

And to add to the troubles of both of them at this troublesome time a letter had been received at the vicarage the morning before from Fred, which dispersed finally all the hopes of an opulent future that had seemed to be within his grasp. His father had handed over to him the remnant of his legacy some months before, and he had embarked it in the undertaking which he had described. The money had gone, chiefly into the pocket of the German who had victimized him and his friend, and the swindler had vanished, leaving behind him a few scores of photographs wonderfully coloured by hand to represent the remains of Fred's little fortune.

The Vicar and his wife talked it over as they drank a cup of tea in the half dismantled dining-room.

"I blame myself for giving way," said the Vicar. "I ought never to have let him have the money."

"It was foolish, certainly," said Mrs. Prentice, who had begged him at the time to do so, "but it seemed such a good thing. I wish I could see that German for a few minutes. He would remember it. There is one thing—such wicked dishonesty cannot prosper. But no pains must be spared to bring him to justice."

"I doubt," said the Vicar, "whether it will be worth while to throw good money after bad in pressing him. You would probably not find him easy to catch. However, I shall hear about it from Fred to-morrow. Poor boy, he writes in great dejection. It has been a rude awakening for him. I hope that in the end it will not be a bad thing. Now, he will have to work hard and make his own way by himself. I am afraid that he must be in difficulties. I have no doubt that he has

anticipated the money he thought he would get, and has run into debt again. We must get to the bottom of that."

"I do hope that you will not be harsh with him. He has had quite enough disappointment, and not through his own fault, already."

"I shall not be harsh to him. I only want to help him, and I will do so to the limit of my power. I shall go up by the early train. I should have liked to bring him back with me, but I suppose that is impossible in the present state of the house. However, we shall all be together for a time when we go to London, and we must all start our work afresh. None of us have been very successful this year."

"The fault is not with us," said Mrs. Prentice. "It is the wickedness of others that has hindered us."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SHADOW

Mr. Prentice went up to town early the next morning and came down again by the five o'clock train. As he sat in a corner of a third-class carriage looking out on the falling dusk, and afterwards into the darkness, he went over in his mind all that had passed between him and his son during that trying day, and gained little satisfaction from what he had learnt, or from the thought of what was to be done in the immediate future. Fred had disclosed to him, without reservation, a tale of monstrous folly and credulity. From his admissions it would have seemed that suspicion of the swindler who had duped him and his friend ought to have occurred to any level-headed man very soon after their taking up his supposed invention. But Fred had declared that he had had no suspicions of the pretended inventor, although he had never liked him, until the money had disappeared and the inventor with it. He had gone on in blind credulity. He had even borrowed more money from his friends to put into the syndicate when he was told that more money was required, and owed some hundreds of pounds which he had no means of repaying. And further than this, he had launched out, in anticipation of wealth, into an extravagant way of living which had already involved him in debt to the extent of over a thousand pounds more. He was penniless, without prospects or even the means of making a living, and he owed something like two thousand pounds.

What was to be done? Mr. Prentice could pay the debts, but they would swallow up every penny of his small savings, and he would have to sell nearly everything he possessed besides. Then he would start life again at the age of fifty-five

with about a hundred pounds a year of his own and the remote chance of being presented to an incumbency which would provide him with a living. He could not see that he was justified in doing this. If he had been remaining at Exton he would have paid his son's debts in full and still been able to live on his income. But now his income would be of the smallest. He intended to take a curacy in London and wait until a living was offered him, not minding very much if he never got another living, for, after all, his work in the Church was the chief thing that occupied his thoughts. But for him and his wife to live on an income of perhaps four hundred a year and make some provision for old age was one thing, and to throw themselves on the world, and support a son until he could support himself, on about half that income, or less, was quite another. And yet he had such a horror of debt that he could not reconcile it with his conscience to keep his stored-up money while his son's creditors went unpaid. Fred, in his helpless dejection, had mentioned the bankruptcy court, but such a way of escaping the burden of debt seemed to the Vicar nothing less than dishonourable. Try as he would, he could see no way out of the difficulty, and as the train rushed on through the gathering darkness, the closing night seemed to be one with the black perplexity to which his thoughts tended.

He thought, without anger, of his son. Fred had been broken up with helpless regret at what he had done. He had offered no justification of his folly to his father's strictures. No blame could deepen the state of remorse in which he had found him. But, on the other hand, the Vicar knew that this crisis in his affairs once over his spirits would rebound, and he would put his troubles away from him. It was difficult to deal with such a character. He could only hope that this last lesson would be such a severe one that he would not run the risk of having it repeated. Fred's weakness, disastrous as it had been, could only arouse the desire to protect him in the heart

of his father, and if he could see his way in the present breaking-up of his own life to help, he would do so, and hope for the best. But how to help! No light came to him, although his thoughts were busy with the problem during the whole of the two hours' journey to Greathampton.

He got out of the fast train to wait for the slow one which should presently take him on to the station for Exton, but as he walked up the platform he was hailed from the window of a first-class carriage by Mrs. Firmin of Standon House, who was going on to Woodhurst, and offered him a lift thence in her motor-car. So he arranged for a telegram to send back his own conveyance, and bundled back into the train again.

Mrs. Firmin's car was a big, new one, with a closed-in body. The Vicar asked if he might sit in front. He wanted the refreshment of the mild night air of the forest, and he could not support the idea of a desultory conversation during the six-mile drive, so he took his place by the *chauffeur*, and Mrs. Firmin and her maid were shut in behind.

They rolled away from the station and through the outskirts of the village into the country lanes, and then into the broad forest road and the mysterious darkness of the great trees. There was no moon and no stars, but the strong light of the two great lamps illumined the road before them with a misty radiance. The car swung on at a high speed, with a musical note of power in its engines. The light fell on tree trunks and shadowy masses of foliage, slipping by and immediately swallowed up again in the darkness. They sped over a bridge and up a steep slope without change of gear, and round a sharp corner guarded by white posts. A rabbit jumped across the road immediately in front of them, and another one ran along by their side, confused by the glare of the lamps, and darted again into the fern. The air was mild and fragrant with the breath of the forest, and the Vicar's brain cleared as if by magic, and everything became plain to him.

He would do his duty. He would take his son's folly upon his own shoulders and denude himself of all that he possessed to straighten out the tangles of his life. He would trust in God for the future. What was the poor provision he had made for his own comfort beside the inexhaustible stores he had to draw on? He would not be forsaken, even though all his worldly possessions were taken from him.

His heart leapt with gratitude and faith. He would lose all, but he would gain all. He had a moment of intense spiritual joy, and as the tide of emotion ebbed it left behind it a deep happ'ness and a clear outlook into the future. Surely now, if he made this sacrifice, his son would take counsel of himself, and put away his follies. He loved him and he would have confidence in him. His wife! She would be one with him in this. She loved the boy too, and would be willing to make sacrifices for him. The necessity for doing so would bring them together again. They would begin a new life. All the confusion and misery of the past few months would be swept away. He would no longer seek to bring home her faults to her by severity and disapproval. She would respond to his love, and she would weep for her faults, brought home to her by her own conscience, when they should begin together their new life of high, self-denying endeavour. Poor Agatha! So hardly driven by her bitter nature! He would shield and protect her against her own lower impulses. He would be strong in love and patience. Never again would they be parted, but go down the vale of life together, bearing all things, hoping all things.

The car had come up a long straight slope bordered by conifers and banks of rhododendron, and now swung round into a road that rose and dipped between low oaks and cleared ground, carpeted with withered bracken, on its way to a high-lying open heath. "Nearly ran into some forest

ponies here as I came down," said the *chauffeur*, and the car went forward at a slower rate.

The Vicar drew in a breath of the sweet, fresh air, rarer now, as it filtered through the trees from the high wide spaces of the heath. It was redolent to him of familiar memories. He felt a gentle regret for this beautiful country in which he had made his home, and which he was so soon to leave. But his exalted spiritual state forbade painful repining. He was at peace with all men. Yes, even with Lady Wrotham, who had spoilt his work and driven him out. Her motives were good. She was sincere, if mistaken. God grant that when he had gone, and the disputes and friction had died down, religion would come once more to be a real thing in Exton. It would not be, in all respects, the religion he had laboured earnestly to teach, but he saw clearly now that form was a small matter, if the spirit was present, and the spirit was a wide thing embracing the universe, blowing where it listed and confined to no creed. He had put his trust in the sacraments of the Church, and his faith in his creed was unshaken. But God's grace could not be confined. It would work amongst the souls of men, though the Church itself should be annihilated. He raised his eyes to the cloudy vault of darkness, and saw above it the power and glory of the God in whom he believed.

Suddenly there was a muttered exclamation from the *chauffeur*, a confused noise of galloping hoofs, a great swerve of the car, a downward lurch, a shock and a breaking. The car recoiled and stood still for a moment, its engines racing. The *chauffeur* was thrown violently against the steering wheel but fell back into his seat with a groan as it jerked forward again, and managed to guide it into the road and bring it to a standstill in a few yards. Just behind it the Vicar was lying senseless, huddled up against a tree on to which he had been thrown as the fore part of the car had struck the pony

full in the flank, after the sudden turn which had taken him unawares and dislodged him from his seat.

There were shrieks from the inside of the carriage. The *chauffeur* sat still a moment to regain his breath, and then extricated himself and, bent with pain, opened the door. "Oh, what is it! What is it?" cried Mrs. Firmin.

The car was standing still, half across the road, one of its lamps shattered, but otherwise uninjured. "Three or four ponies ran across me," gasped the *chauffeur*. "I'd just turned to escape them when another come and we run right into him. The gentleman was thrown out. I'm afraid he's hurt."

He took the small lamp from behind the car and turned back, still groaning. He had broken a rib against the steering wheel, which had saved him from being thrown over the bonnet of the car. Mrs. Firmin and the maid, shaken only by the shock, alighted and went back too. The Vicar was lying where he had fallen, and from his head trickled a thin stream of blood and soaked into the damp soil. There was no sign of the pony, which had been knocked over by the impact, but had risen and hobbled away after its fellows into the forest.

"He is badly hurt," said Mrs. Firmin. "Oh, what shall we do? He cannot lie here. Are you hurt too, John?"

"I think I've broke something, ma'am, but I'm feeling a bit better."

"Can you help me lift him into the car?" Mrs. Firmin was kneeling beside the senseless form on the ground, regardless of her velvets and furs, supporting his head. "We could do it, all three of us. Can the car go on, or is it damaged?"

"It's only the lamp broke, ma'am. But there's a house a few yards on."

"Yes, of course there is. Wallace, you had better run there and get help. John, can you get my dressing-bag?

There is a little brandy there. Take some. We must not give it to Mr. Prentice, but there is eau de Cologne. Bring it to me."

She did what she could, but the Vicar never stirred or opened his eyes, lying there helpless until a man who lived in a cottage on the borders of the heath and the wood came running back with the maid. Then they got him on to the floor of the car between them and she supported his head on her lap as they drove on to Exton, and to the vicarage.

And so the Vicar was brought back to his wife whom he had left in the freshness of the morning without her having so much as come to the door to bid him farewell.

She sat by his bedside, with dry eyes and a startled, incredulous look in them, some hours later. Everything had been done that could have been done. Mrs. Firmin had gone off to fetch the doctor who lived five miles away. Her man was suffering considerable pain but he declared himself able to drive so far out of his way. The doctor had come over on his own motor bicycle, and when he had seen what was necessary, had ridden to the Forest Lodge and Mr. Ferraby had sent off a car to Greathampton to bring back a surgeon. There had been a wait of two hours during which Mrs. Prentice strove to bring home to herself what had taken place and to fight off the awful feeling of dread that hammered for admission to her brain. Neither she nor the doctor could do anything but wait, and though she plied him with entreaties, he would not say anything more hopeful than that he hoped the Greathampton surgeon would be able to do something. It was plain, if she had allowed herself to accept it, that he himself had little hope.

A little comfort had come with the surgeon; the bustle of his arrival, his self-reliant bearing and direct, confident speech had eased the tension. She had been shut out of the room while the two doctors had performed the operation

which might save her husband's life—she had come to admit that, that his very life hung on the success of this operation—but when it was over something very like despair had settled down on her heart again. The doctors had come out of the room with grave faces. Neither of them had given her a word of hope. There was nothing new to look forward to, nothing that could be done to stem the current flowing out to the waters of death, and turn it back to the bright fields of life. There was nothing to do but to wait and watch, with the numbing consciousness that life was ebbing away, slowly and surely, and the dark waters would presently swallow it up.

The Greathampton surgeon had motored back to the hospitalities of the Forest Lodge, which were somewhat overclouded by this sudden, terrible occurrence, but not so much as to be quite extinguished, and the local doctor was lying down in another room. Mrs. Prentice was alone with her husband.

He was lying with his eyes open, their pupils widely dilated, but no consciousness in them. His head was bandaged and he was breathing heavily. With the outside of her brain she knew that he was dying, but she had not yet admitted it to herself; only that he was in grave peril, and beyond the reach of her most anxious care. Once or twice she bent over him and looked into his eyes. It seemed impossible that he should not be aware of her, and answer, or at least show that he heard if she spoke to him. But the eyes showed no sign of the brain behind them, and the noisy breathing went on monotonously, the knell of hope.

She was full of terror and compunction. She could not command her thoughts; they were in a whirl of confusion. But one little fact kept rising to the surface like a bit of wreckage in a whirlpool to show what was beneath the surface. She had let him go away this morning without a fare-

well. The custom of many years had nearly brought her to the door, but pride had risen up and held her back, and he had driven away unsped. She could hear the wheels of the carriage now on the soft gravel. He had driven away to this, and this was her punishment for not bidding him good-bye. It was monstrous. Why should she be punished like this?

Oh, but it could not be. He would get well, and everything would be as it had been before. No, not as it had been before. She had done wrong. Without a vestige of exact thought, either of self-defence or self-accusation, on the events of the past months and what had led up to them, she yet acknowledged that she had done wrong. He had blamed her, but not harshly, not undeservedly, and he had been right to blame her. But he was a good man and a kind husband. He would forgive her, and they would be friends again, and happy together. She had only to ask his forgiveness and turn to him, and all would be as it had been throughout the years of their married life; better than it had been, for she would be careful not to offend him again. If only this breathing would stop, and he would close his eyes and sleep! When he awoke again he might forget that she had not said good-bye to him in the morning. At any rate he would forgive her that, and other things.

Her thoughts chattered lightly. This was the husband of whom she had been so proud. She remembered little details of his wooing of her, a handsome young man, rather sought after by the ladies of his congregation, full of energy and high ideals. He had had eyes only for her. In the early days of his priesthood his views had been considered advanced, but hers had been just the same as his, and when at last they had been married and settled down to a life of very happy poverty and hard work, they had seen eye to eye in everything. How proud he had been of his little son, and how ready to give up

his personal comfort on behalf of the baby in their narrow quarters. They had been very happy in those early days before promotion had come, living strictly and rather meagrely, but with nothing to cause them anxiety in their own home, however ready to burden themselves with the griefs of their poorer neighbours. Her thoughts roamed idly over the years in London. Somehow there was a barrier to keep them behind the point at which the London work had been exchanged for the more spacious and comfortable life of the country vicarage. But as they wandered from one point to another, idly, almost pleasantly, the background of gloom and dread deepened, until at last the black consciousness of loss broke through them and flooded all her brain. Her husband was dying. He would never speak to her again, never look on her to know her face. With a cry of anguish, she threw herself on to the bed, and wept and wailed for her loss.

The doctor came hurrying into the room, and would have removed her forcibly, but she held back her grief and despair, and stood up to face him. "You can leave me with him now," she said. "I know the worst, and I won't give way again."

He paused irresolutely. The dying man lay quiet, deaf to that agonized cry and to everything around him. The breath came and went in his throat, his eyes stared unseeing in front of him. Nothing she could do would hasten or retard his passing. But, for her own sake, he would have stayed with her till the end.

"I must be alone with him," she repeated. "I won't give way again. I have so little time to be with him. Please leave me." And he went out again.

Now the deeps were broken up and the waters flowed. She wept bitterly, but without noise. Everything was plain to her, all her unworthiness and the sorrow which she had brought to him during these months which, had she but known it,

were to be his last on earth. The memory of that bitter time would never pass away from her as long as she lived. He was a good man, and she had never valued him as he deserved, had given him much cause for sorrow, and had latterly grieved him to the point of death. She could not put away from her the thought that this accident, coming just at the time of the climax in affairs, was somehow the outcome of them, and that she was partly responsible for it. More than once her despair threatened to overwhelm her again, but she always beat it down, and her tears flowed afresh to wash it back. Presently one thought held her to the exclusion of everything else. He was still alive, still with her, and she must make the most of the time until death tore him from her altogether. With a heart almost suffocating with pain, she gazed on him, holding his cold hand. His harsh drawing of breath became music in her ears, because it still meant life; his meaningless stare held no terror for her, because she saw herself reflected in still living eyes. She embraced his rigid form, smoothed his bandaged brow, murmured words of love. She felt a kind of fierce joy in the thought that he still lived and was still hers. She had projected herself into the dreadful future, and held him as if he had been given back to her from the dead.

Presently she lay quite still beside him, her eyes closed. It might have been thought that she was asleep.

The grey dawn filled the window panes. The birds under the eaves twittered a welcome to a new day. And with the dawn the heavy breathing lessened and died away, and the Vicar entered upon another life's work.

CHAPTER XXXVII

RECONCILIATION

"I MUST go to her," Mrs. Redcliffe said.

Hilda looked at her. There was concern in her face, but some indecision too. "Poor woman!" she said. "But do you think she will see you, mother?"

Mrs. Redcliffe rose from the table. "I don't know," she said. "But I must go."

There was no feeling in her mind, as she walked down from the White House to the village, but one of deep compassion. Mrs. Prentice's behaviour to her was forgotten. Her mind did not even dwell on the possibility of her having to face some awkwardness in going to the vicarage. She went as she would have gone a year before, when she and Mrs. Prentice were on friendly terms. She went because her sorrow and pity might soothe the shocked spirit of a woman who had received a deep wound, and there was no room in her mind for the least degree of selfish consideration.

She was shown into the dining-room, the only sitting-room in the house which remained habitable, and here there were everywhere signs of the coming change, which had been merged in a change of so much more terrible an import. She was thrilled with a fresh pang of sorrow as she realized how this arrested demolition of her home must add to the distress of the bereaved woman.

The door opened, and Mrs. Prentice entered. She had mastered her grief for the time, and, though her eyes were red and her face was pale, she was not otherwise altered in appearance. She shut the door behind her and came towards Mrs. Redcliffe with an air of offence. She opened her mouth

to speak, and it was plain that her intention was to ask the reason of an intrusion; or it would have been plain if there had been any one in the room to take notice of her manner. Mrs. Redcliffe saw nothing of it. She saw only a woman who had suffered a cruel and stunning blow, and she saw her only dimly, through her tears. She came forward with an inarticulate cry of grief and sympathy, and the next moment Mrs. Prentice was clinging to her and weeping on her shoulder.

They sat together, and the poor broken woman sobbed out her grief and her contrition. "He was so good," she said. "I see it all now; and how right he was in everything and how wicked I have been. And for months I have hardly spoken a kind word to him. How can I go on living with that to remember? I did not even say good-bye to him when he went away yesterday morning. I never spoke to him, and he was brought back to me to die. Oh, how can I bear the thought of it?"

She rocked herself to and fro in an agony of grief. Truly here was occasion for sorrow beyond human power to console. Mrs. Redcliffe comforted her as well as she was able, and presently she grew a little calmer.

"You are very good to me," she said. "I have behaved badly to you too."

But Mrs. Redcliffe stopped her at once. "My dear," she said, "that is all over and done with. I have put it quite away from me. Anything that I had to forgive I have forgiven fully and freely. It shall never come between us again."

The poor woman wept again, and talked of her dead, lying oblivious of her remorseful sorrow. But she was calmer.

"I can't tell you what a comfort it is to have you with me," she said. "I have no friends now, and it is

my own fault. Oh, that I could have the past months back again!"

They talked of the future. "Poor Fred is on his way here," she said. "He has been in sad trouble—about money—and it was on his account he went up to London yesterday. I don't know what was settled. But I know that he would only have been kind and helpful. Oh, the loss of his wisdom and love! I don't know what will happen now. We shall be very poor. But why do I talk of that? Nothing matters except his loss."

Neither of them had heard a ring at the bell and voices outside the room. The door was opened and Lady Wrotham was announced.

She came into the room slowly, leaning on her stick. Her face showed deep concern.

Mrs. Prentice sprang to her feet. "Why do you come here?" she cried. Her eyes blazed and her hands were tight clenched.

Lady Wrotham stood still, but she showed no surprise at her reception, nor did her face change its expression. "I came," she said quietly, "to tell you how shocked and grieved I am to hear of your loss, and to ask if I could do anything to help you."

"To help me!" echoed Mrs. Prentice, "*you* to help me! You who did all you could to make his life wretched—the last months he had on earth. You who had driven him out of the place and turned everybody who loved him against him! I wouldn't accept help from you if I were starving. And you haven't come to offer help. You've come here to triumph over me. You've had your way. The good man you've persecuted is lying up-stairs dead. He won't trouble you any more. You've got rid of him now. Why can't you leave me alone? I don't want you. I never want to look on your face again."

She poured out her words in a torrent of scorn and anger, and then sunk into her seat and burst into hysterical tears.

"It is perhaps natural that you should look upon me as an enemy," said Lady Wrotham; "but death ought to do away with enmity. There is none left in my thoughts. I am deeply sorry for everything that has happened. I would undo it if I could. Can you not forget what is past and let me be a friend to you?"

"No," said Mrs. Prentice. "I do not want your friendship. You have behaved wickedly. You divided me from my husband, and when I would have gone back to him it was too late. Oh, too late, and I shall never be able to tell him how sorry I am."

She broke down again, sobbing and moaning.

Mrs. Redcliffe rose from her seat. "I think," she said, "it would be better to leave her now. I will stay with her."

The two women faced one another. Each had latterly played a large part in the life of the other, but they had never yet met face to face or had speech together.

"I am very glad you are here," said Lady Wrotham. "I will go now; but Mrs. Prentice must not think that I bear any ill-will towards her for what she has said to me. I am deeply grieved on her account, and if she will see me later on I will come to her again."

She turned and went out of the room. "I won't see her," cried Mrs. Prentice. "You must not let her come again. It was she who made the mischief. I should not have had this terrible estrangement to reproach myself with if it had not been for her."

Mrs. Redcliffe stayed with her all the morning. The poor woman clung to her, and would not let her go. She took her up to the darkened room where her husband lay, with all the trouble and anxiety of life smoothed out of his face. She relied on her for a decision as to all the wearying details that

had to be settled as the hours went on; she drew on her strong faith for consolation, and gained some patience and resignation in her trial.

Fred came about noon, dazed with horror and incredulity, and then Mrs. Redcliffe went away and left the mother and son to bewail their loss together.

Mrs. Redcliffe, when she reached home, was for a time almost prostrated by the stress of emotion she had undergone. Hilda made much of her and drew from her an account of what had passed, but she told her nothing of Lady Wrotham's visit. It was of so little importance beside the great fact of the Vicar's death and Mrs. Prentice's unhappy state that she did not think of it.

"I am so glad you went, mother," Hilda said. "I know you must have done the poor thing good. Norah has been here, and she would like to have gone, but was afraid that she wouldn't want her. And Mr. Browne. He is going to do everything he can to relieve her of trouble. She will find every one kind now. But you are the best of all."

Francis Redcliffe hung about the room with his hands in his pockets, honestly solicitous, but feeling rather helpless. Hilda induced her mother to go up-stairs and lie down, and then returned to him, her eyes glowing.

"Don't you think my mother is the most wonderful woman you have ever known?" she said. "Poor Mrs. Prentice—she is in terrible trouble now and one tries to forget everything she has done, but it isn't easy, even now. But mother has forgotten all about it. She was annoyed when I asked her if it had been mentioned. Oh, Francis, I haven't got a character like that."

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. "You have," he said, "if you only knew it."

But Hilda turned away. "You don't know what you're saying," she said. "Mother is a saint, and I'm anything but

that. But to live with her and know her makes you want to be like her."

Mrs. Redcliffe was sitting in the parlour in the afternoon and Francis and Hilda were in the garden. It was still golden weather and the glass doors were wide open. Hilda came through them in a hurry. "Mother," she said, "Lady Wrotham is coming. Her carriage has just come through the gate. What are you going to do?"

Mrs. Redcliffe was flurried for a moment. "I forgot to tell you," she said, "that Lady Wrotham came to the vicarage while I was there this morning. She wants to see me. You had better go out again. I will see her alone."

Hilda hesitated a moment, and then went out. Mrs Redcliffe rose from her seat and then resumed it. Lady Wrotham was announced.

"Mrs. Redcliffe," she said, as the door was closed behind her, "I hope you will not resent my coming to see you. There have been misunderstandings between us for which I take the blame. I hope that you wish them at an end as much as I do."

"I am very glad you have come, Lady Wrotham," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "As for what is past we need think of it no more. It no longer troubles me, and I do not think that you need take the blame for it."

The air of tension relaxed. Both ladies sat down, and Lady Wrotham said, "I cannot blame myself for wantonly spreading abroad gossip about you, for I never meant to do that, and was greatly concerned when I found it was being done. But I wish now that when I first knew I had done you an injury I had seen you. I could have helped you to meet it, and perhaps we might have been friends."

There was no trace of her usual haughty manner. There was apology in her bearing as well as her speech. Mrs. Redcliffe found herself drawn towards her.

"I wish we could have been friends, Lady Wrotham," she said. "But I shall leave Exton now with very different feelings to what I should have done if I had never seen you to talk to. And you must not think of me as having borne you any ill-will, now for a long time past. I think it has been as much our fault as yours that we have not come together before. Things have been said in the heat of the moment that you must have found it difficult to forgive; and I can only thank you for overlooking them and coming to see me now."

"I was coming before," said Lady Wrotham. "And I was angry with your daughter, I confess, for putting it, as I thought, out of my power to do so. But I will think of that no more. I can understand that a high-spirited girl might not weigh her expressions very carefully, if she thought that her mother was being badly used. I should like to see her presently and congratulate her on her engagement. And, Mrs. Redcliffe, you understand how it was that I seemed to have set on foot the trouble you underwent earlier in the year, while I am really not entirely responsible for it, and you will not let it stand between us now."

"Indeed, no," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "It is over, and troubles me no more. And you must remember, too, that it has really resulted in great happiness, for it brought Francis Redcliffe to us, and I cannot see anything but happiness to come to my daughter from her marriage with him."

"I am very glad that you can look upon it in that way, and I am only sorry that we have not come together before, for I think that perhaps we might have helped one another in many ways. You may judge what a terrible shock poor Mr. Prentice's death has been to me, after all that has happened between us. I feel almost as if I were in some way responsible for it, as that poor woman said this morning."

Her manner changed from the dignity and self-possession,

with which she had made her peace with Mrs. Redcliffe, to one of acute distress. She seemed to shrink into herself, and no longer sat erect in her chair. Her face plainly betokened doubt and self-reproach, and Mrs. Redcliffe divined in a flash of insight that the great lady, thoroughly upset by what had happened, had come to her for comfort and support, just as Mrs. Prentice, after her first impulse of offence, had gone to her. She drew her chair a little closer to Lady Wrotham's.

"I am quite sure," she said, "that you ought not to allow yourself to think that. Poor Mrs. Prentice hardly knew what she was saying in her grief, and ——"

"Oh, it is not what she said," cried Lady Wrotham. "Poor woman, I forgive her that freely. I think nothing of it. It is what I feel myself. I did make his life hard for him, and it is true, quite true, to say that I drove him away. I meant to do so. I don't think I felt any enmity towards him personally. I liked him, apart from what I believed was his dangerous teaching. I respected him, and according to his lights I am sure he was a good man. But it seemed impossible to keep on anything like cordial terms with him while I was doing all I could to get him removed, and of course she made it quite impossible afterwards. But his death seems to have altered everything. I have tried to do what I thought to be right in the position in which I am placed, but I seem to have brought nothing but unhappiness here. Oh, Mrs. Redcliffe, I feel it very deeply."

Probably no one had ever seen Lady Wrotham in tears, but Mrs. Redcliffe was very nearly seeing it now. She was no doubt in deep distress, and inclined, against every habit she had formed during a long life, to blame herself severely for what she had done. It was not easy to pour balm into her wounds, for it was impossible to acquit her of overbearing harshness towards the man whose death had brought her mis-

takes home to her, and it would have seemed to Mrs. Redcliffe a disloyalty to his memory to do so.

"I think," she said, "that at a time like this it is natural that we should blame ourselves severely for any unkindness we may have committed. But it is certain that those who have left us cannot join in the blame, and I think, if we regret it, they may know of our altered feelings."

"Do you really believe that? I hope it is so, for I cannot deny that he had reason to think harshly of me."

"I don't think he did so. I think he gave you credit for sincerity, as you have given him credit. It is possible to respect those who differ from us honestly, and he respected you. I am sure of it."

"Do you think he did?" asked Lady Wrotham rather weakly. "I should like to think so. But I must not dwell on that. I see, quite plainly, that I have been wrong in many ways. I have searched out my heart. Humility is becoming to a Christian. Perhaps it has not been a virtue that I have followed very closely. This shock has brought certain things clearly home to me, and it is a good thing to know one's self thoroughly. No. I can see that with all my desires to play my part well, I have not been successful. I have brought strife where before there was peace and contentment, and it grieves me deeply to be obliged to confess it. Now everything is breaking up. Poor Mr. Prentice is dead and his wife is going away. You are leaving, and others too, and I shall be left alone here to remember what has come to pass, and to regret it deeply. How little I thought, only a few months ago, that it would come to this!"

Mrs. Redcliffe hardly knew what to reply to this outburst of self-reproach, half grotesque, half pathetic. She realized that she was witnessing a rare exhibition of feeling, one probably that few if any of Lady Wrotham's intimate friends would have deemed her capable of. But she saw, too, that

alongside the hurt pride and the tardy conviction of error, there lay the sense of isolation, the appeal for sympathy and companionship. She responded to it generously.

"You will gather other friends round you," she said, "and I am sure that with your desire to help them there will be happiness both for yourself and for others who come to live here. I think, perhaps, we wanted stirring up a little. We were so very pleased with ourselves. And as far as we are concerned in this house we are happier now than we were before. You must think of that, Lady Wrotham, and do not reproach yourself for what no longer causes us any sorrow. I am so glad that you have come to me, and that we shall not leave Exton without making friends with you. There is nothing that I should have regretted more than that."

"It is very kind of you to say so," replied Lady Wrotham, with a return towards her more ordinary manner. "I hope you will all come and dine with me shortly—perhaps after poor Mr. Prentice's funeral—and as far as I can I will try to make up to you for the injustice you have experienced. But you will come and see me before that, I hope. I am getting old, and I confess I am lonely here. I shall be glad if we can become friends."

The reconciliation was complete. The two ladies talked together for some time with quiet friendliness, and then Lady Wrotham took her leave. "I should like to see your daughter," she said, "before I go."

They went out into the garden where Hilda and Francis Redcliffe were walking together. They were summoned. Hilda came up with an air half of distrust, half of pride. Lady Wrotham looked up in her face. "Your mother has made friends with me," she said. "I hope that you will do the same."

Hilda stammered and blushed. "I'm afraid I was very rude to you once," she said.

"You were," said Lady Wrotham. "But you had some reason to be, and I have forgiven you. I am glad to hear you are going to be married. Perhaps you will introduce me to your cousin."

The introduction was made, commonplaces were interchanged, and Lady Wrotham got into her carriage and drove away.

"Francis," said Hilda, "I have no enemies in the world now."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

NEW YEAR'S EVE

It was New Year's Eve. The lamp outside the old gate house of the Abbey, lit to welcome the guests expected by her ladyship, threw its beams on a road hard with frost. The night was clear and still, and the moon was showing a bright rim over the western hill.

Browne's dog-cart came down the road and turned in under the archway. The sharp impact of his horse's hoofs could be heard long before the lights showed round the distant bend. Mrs. O'Keefe's brougham followed it in a few minutes. Then came a landau from the White House, and, finally, Turner's cart from the dark wood. The two carriages came out again and drove away. The light was put out and the full disk of the moon swung clear of the horizon.

The old dining-hall, with its vaulted roof and great open hearth, still wore its Christmas decoration of holly and ivy and mistletoe, and the air of festivity suggested by these accessories was repeated in the faces and manner of the diners. One would have said that none of them had a care in the world, and it was probably true that care was as far from every one of them this evening as it could be from nine people, all of whom had some experience of life and a few of them a long one.

Lady Wrotham sat at the head of her table, doing the honours royally. It was the last night of a year, which had opened for her with sorrow and had gone on to disappointment and loneliness. And now she was surrounded by her neighbours, and there was no feeling between her and them but one of good-will. On her right were Francis Redcliffe and Hilda,

and on her left Turner and Mrs. Redcliffe, and she had something to say to all of them. There was friendship and even merriment and no shadow of past disagreement. Turner seemed to be in specially high favour, and his dry witticisms were received with gratifying appreciation. But of course it was Wrotham who diffused the air of hilarity which was most befitting the season. Francis Redcliffe occasionally dived beneath the lively surface for a moment or two of privacy with Hilda; but Wrotham's method was otherwise. His eye was not infrequently on Norah, who sat at his left, and his conversation always included her, but his homage was paid through the high spirits which he brought to bear on the whole company, and his happiness was plain to see. Lady Syde, sitting on his right hand, may have felt the warm glow of satisfaction which she was entitled to feel at the remembrance of how she had removed a threatened danger to that now consummated happiness. She took her part in the talk and laughter and looked years younger than her age as her eyes sparkled in the keen face underneath the white hair. Browne, on her right, was a little out of his depth with her, but under the cover of the general conversation was able to eat his dinner comfortably and chuckle contentedly at any sally which his rather slowly pursuing brain succeeded in overtaking; or he would address himself to Mrs. Redcliffe, who sat on his other side, and with whom he always felt at home.

Later in the evening, throwing back the window curtains of the up-stairs drawing-room and revealing the silvered stretches of the park, lit by the most brilliant of moons, Wrotham suddenly took it into his head that this was the time of all others to visit the ruins of the Abbey, and rested not until he had bundled the ladies into their furs and taken them out into the bright, still night. Lady Wrotham and Lady Syde, their remonstrances overborne, sat on by the fire, but Mrs. Redcliffe joined the party of adventure, probably guess-

ing that that party would inevitably break into fragments, and willing to be the companion of the two who would not ardently desire to snatch a few minutes' conversation with one another under romantic circumstances.

"Sarah," said Lady Syde, when the door had closed on the talk and laughter and the two old ladies were left to the silence of the big room, "this is a far happier state of things than was the case a few months ago. It seems a pity that it should have come so late, and now it has come that it should so soon be ending."

Lady Wrotham did not reply for a moment, but sat gazing into the fire, with a look on her face that it was difficult to interpret.

"Exton will not be so lively when the changes have come about," she said. "But we are getting old, Henrietta, you and I, and when you settle down at the White House, we shall no doubt be able to amuse one another in a quiet way without missing the liveliness."

"You say that because you want peace after all the disturbances you have gone through," returned Lady Syde. "I also want peace for the years I have left; but you may have peace without stagnation, and I own that the society of young people is welcome to me. I could wish that all those who are here now were not going to fly away from us."

"We shall have George and Norah here very often, I hope," said Lady Wrotham. "They both know that I wish that, and I think they are both anxious to meet my wishes."

"They should be, Sarah. You have behaved generously towards them. You must feel it a great relief to be at last on terms of affection with George. You will admit now, I suppose, that you have lost nothing by treating him with less harshness than before."

"I admit nothing of the kind," said Lady Wrotham shortly. "My treatment of George was always founded on justice. It

is only since he broke away from the disastrous influence of Laurence that it has been possible to relax an attitude that was called for by what was going on. If I had treated George with the foolish indulgence with which you have treated Laurence there would be nothing to choose between them. One would have been as bad as the other. No, indeed! I have nothing to regret there."

"Well," said Lady Syde, in no wise upset by this turning of the tables, "we are not likely to agree upon that point and may as well leave it. Laurence is not so bad as he is painted. He gave me a handsome jewel at Christmas, and I value it because I know he is in money difficulties and it meant a sacrifice to him. But he shall not lose by his generosity. You will not deny, I suppose, that you have made mistakes since you have been here, and have now learnt better."

"I don't know why I should either deny or admit it, Henrietta. It seems to me a little odd that you should show such a desire to charge me with making mistakes. At all events, if I had taken your advice, I should have turned every soul in the Manor off it. It is not for you to charge me with mistakes, which you do probably because you are annoyed with what I said about Laurence."

"I am not in the least annoyed. Your unfairness to Laurence has always been apparent, and I have always taken it into account. And as for my advice to you, you must remember that I had only heard one side. If I had known what sort of a woman Mrs. Redcliffe was I should never have suggested your getting rid of her. I should have seen that she was more likely to be right in any matter of dispute than yourself—I say it in no spirit of offence."

Lady Wrotham displayed an unexpected meekness in face of this direct statement. "We need not quarrel about Mrs. Redcliffe, Henrietta," she said, quietly. "She is a noble-hearted woman."

"I quite agree with you," replied Lady Syde. "I wish I were more like her myself. If I had had such an example before me in my youth I might have been; but at my age it is too late to begin. I am afraid, Sarah, that in having me at the White House instead of her the exchange will not be altogether a better one."

"As to that," said Lady Wrotham uncompromisingly, "I have no illusions. But we understand one another, and there is no likelihood of our permanently falling out, although, no doubt, we shall often disagree."

"I hope so," said Lady Syde. "Disagreement need not destroy friendship, and ours is firmly fixed, I hope, whatever we may say to one another."

"I think it is, Henrietta. I do not resent your *brusque* speeches, though they are often quite uncalled for, and I should certainly do so if they came from any one else."

"I speak my mind," said Lady Syde. "It is the better way. Sometimes I am wrong, but more often I am right. Sarah, I am glad we shall be together during the coming year, and I hope for some years to come, you in your big house and I in my little one. The changes in Exton benefit me, if no one else."

"They benefit me to that extent," replied Lady Wrotham, mollified. "And, of course, although Mr. Prentice's sudden death was a great shock to me, and I have something to regret in remembering what came before it, it is a relief to have a man like Mr. Dacre here, with whom I see eye to eye on religious matters, and who will help instead of hindering my work."

"Ah, well," said Lady Syde. "I won't say too much about that. You might take exception to one of my *brusque* speeches, as you call them, if I were to say that you probably hindered Mr. Prentice's work as much as he hindered yours. So I won't say it. It is a question for your own conscience,

and if that is at rest on the subject I am glad of it. I never met Mr. Prentice, but I believe he was a good man. His wife, of course, was a horror. You are well rid of her, at any rate."

"Poor woman!" said Lady Wrotham. "My anger against her has departed. I could even wish to make friends with her, but that she would not do. Perhaps it is not to be wondered at."

"She has been well punished for her wickedness. She is very poor, is she not?"

"She has enough to live on. I—er—there was a fund. I could not very well subscribe to it in my own name; she might not have accepted my help; but I did so through George. That must not be mentioned, Henrietta. And Mr. Prentice left a little money. She can live without anxiety. I am glad of it. And Mr. Ferraby was kind enough to find a position in his business for her son, who was extravagant and brought trouble to his father. That is all happily settled, and he has a chance of doing well for himself."

"Mr. Ferraby! Then you see, Sarah, the worldly people you objected to so much, are not without their uses."

"Henrietta, do not let us spar any more. I am fully alive to the lessons that the past year has brought, but I do not wish them thrown continually in my face. We are none of us too old to learn, and I dare say both you and I are wiser now than we were at the end of last year, and at the end of next year let us hope we shall be wiser still. Learn by the mistakes you make, I say, but do not always be dwelling on them."

"Sarah," said Lady Syde, "I think in some ways you are wiser than I am."

The ruined cloisters of the old Abbey lay white and still under the moon. For three hundred years they had echoed to

the busy life of praise and work that had been carried on in them day and night to the glory of the Lord, and for nearly four hundred they had lain desolate and destroyed, while the life of the world had passed them by, and work and praise had fulfilled themselves in other ways. The grass had grown green over the graves of the old abbots and churchmen of the long distant past, and ivy and the scented growth of myrtle and fig and magnolia had thrown a veil over the scarred walls and pointed arches, as beautiful now in their decay as they had been in the days of their pride; and never more beautiful than on this still winter night, when every leaf and twig was immovable, as if carved in stone, with sharp white lights and inky shadows, bound in the grip of the rimeless frost.

It was a scene of romantic beauty, and no doubt enhanced the delight of the two pairs of lovers for whom there were shadowed arches and doorways under which to whisper renewal of vows already many times declared. It was as Mrs. Redcliffe had foreseen. Wrotham and Norah, and Francis and Hilda had paired themselves and she was left to pace the paths of the cloister garth with Browne and Turner.

"Capital idea this," said Turner, burying his hands in the depths of his ulster pockets and hunching his shoulders. "Much better than sitting over a stuffy fire on a night like this. Might have picnicked out here if we'd thought of it."

"Always grousing!" said Browne. "I'm glad we came. Never seen the cloisters look more beautiful, with the moon and all that. Some people would give a lot to see this."

"You're such a romantic young fellow," said Turner.

"Don't quarrel," Mrs. Redcliffe interrupted. "It is the last night of the year. I am glad we came, too, Mr. Browne. When you think of all the centuries that this quiet place has seen, it helps you to make little of the troubles that life brings you. They are soon over, and then time buries them."

"They're pretty real while they last," said Turner. "We've

had a dooce of a lot of 'em this year, here. If you can forget yours, Mrs. Redcliffe, it does you credit. But it's no more than I should have expected of you."

"By Jove, no," corroborated Browne.

"I don't want to talk of that," said Mrs. Redcliffe. "It is all nothing now. I was thinking of poor Mrs. Prentice. This spot must be much in her thoughts now. It is a sad time for her, but even her troubles will pass away. And as for him, he is lying here with his life's work done, where so many others before him were laid. They are dead, but their work goes on. Perhaps not one of them could have been spared, and their failures went to make them what they were as well as their success."

Turner threw back his head. "Life's a queer business," he said, and nodded towards the hidden shadows. "They've got the best of it. They're young."

Mrs. Redcliffe smiled. "I think we have the best of it," she said, "we who are older, because we know the worst as well as the best. And the worst is not so bad, after all. Now I think we must go indoors again."

THE END

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